



# The Flies are Buzzing: Holy Communion in Recent Pastoral Practice

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**F**OR A PERSON OF A CERTAIN AGE, A HORSE GAMBOLING IN A FIELD EVOKES memories of old western movies. The likes of Gene Autry riding his noble steed to bring justice is a shamelessly romantic image that does not fade. Of course, films never showed the reality of life with horses—the flies and the droppings. And we all know there wasn't really an orchestra hidden in the sage brush, but we still remember the sound and the thrill.

Reading current liturgical scholarship, especially that dealing with the sacraments, is like watching that horse lolling in a field, with all the attendant associations. The description of liturgy on the printed page is often at odds with the way liturgy actually occurs in a congregational setting. The recommendations and diagrams in the manual are evocative; but somehow they overlook the flies and the droppings. Increasingly the ensemble lurking in the chancel gives rise to a musical sound very different from what we remember. In short, holy communion in recent pastoral practice is frequently at odds with memory on the one hand, and with much of the current literature on the other.

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*Current disagreements about pastoral practice related to holy communion are part of our present "culture wars." It is time for an open and modest conversation that respects the various pieties within the tradition.*

In recent years holy communion has become, with the word, a focus for corporate worship, thus expressing “the unity of the people of God and their continuity with Christians across the ages.”<sup>1</sup> Since the publication of *Lutheran Book of Worship* in 1978, holy communion has been regarded as the norm for the Sunday assembly of believers. In 1995, *With One Voice* took its place alongside *LBW* as an additional volume of resources, especially for Lutherans. The continuing pre-eminence of the eucharist is underscored in an introductory section: “Sunday is the primary day on which the Church assembles....The baptized gather to hear the word, to pray for those in need, to offer thanks to God for the gift of salvation, to receive the bread of life and the cup of blessing, and to be renewed for the daily witness of faith, hope and love.”<sup>2</sup>

Holy communion has often been called the sacrament of unity—a thought evocatively expressed in William H. Turton’s hymn (*LBW* 206):

Lord, who the night you were betrayed did pray  
That all your Church might be forever one:  
Help us at ev’ry Eucharist to say  
With willing heart and soul, “Your will be done.”  
That we may all one bread, one body be  
Through this, your sacrament of unity.

It is a haunting image: the people assembled weekly around word and meal, a model of Christian unity. For many pastors in numerous places, however, it is a picture that ignores the flies.

If one listens closely to recent conversations about holy communion, voices emerge that indicate more discord than unity, more perplexity than clarity, and perhaps more wishful thinking than common cause. Perhaps there is theological unity in the understanding of the sacrament; and in some places the goals of *LBW* and *WOV* have doubtless been realized. But current pastoral practice is complicated by the seeming lack of general consensus. Voices in the conversation about the sacrament of unity (including how we refer to the sacrament itself) have become strident, often making the pastoral task a little like whisking flies.

Increasingly leaders in the assembly are aware that they have to be constantly conscious of where they step, for the footing is neither so certain as memory would have it nor so clear as the manuals suggest. Ironically, at the very time Lutherans are preparing to adopt a statement on the practice of word and sacrament, evidence suggests that we are less of one mind than we were a generation ago. Accordingly, this essay will consider from a pastoral perspective some current concerns that reflect the uneasy—if not heated—situation in the church regarding communion practices.

### I. LOOKING BACKWARD—REGARDING CHANGE

Some pastors will remember the liturgical situation that antedated the intro-

<sup>1</sup>*Lutheran Book of Worship* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 6.

<sup>2</sup>*With One Voice* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 8.

duction of *LBW*, a situation shared by many protestant churches. A generalized consensus gathered together many seeming points of agreement which were truly matters of popular piety. While those days are better left behind, they nonetheless form a picture which *does* linger in the memory like the old western movie. For instance, thirty years ago it was common practice for communion to be offered less than a dozen times a year. The words of institution stood alone, unsupported by a prayer of thanksgiving. If a person felt unworthy to receive the sacrament, that person would either sit in the pew during the distribution or leave the church without shame during the singing of a pre-communion hymn. This practice was defended and explained on the basis of the piety it represented: a high regard for the special nature of the sacrament which tended to magnify the unworthiness of the recipient.

Of course, this picture ignores the flies too. Along with such a piety of unworthiness came a sense of solemnity that precluded any outward show of joy. Fasting was encouraged on days when communion would be served. Men wore starched shirts and knotted ties; women were expected to wear hats. Young people were not admitted to communion until they had been confirmed around the age of fourteen or fifteen. Communicants filed up to the altar by “tables” to receive a wafer and a small prefilled glass of wine. Each table received its own blessing and the communicants returned to their seats to meditate or pray while the organ perhaps played softly. Such was the practice of monthly (or less frequent) communion before a new wind swept in and blew it—or almost all of it—away.

In the years following Vatican II, the 1960s and 1970s, discussions about worship in general and communion in particular took off, thanks mostly to the ecumenical reach of the liturgical movement. By 1978, when *Lutheran Book of Worship* was released, the old picture of communion had been almost completely altered. Significant changes had begun to take place with regard to communion practices; by the present day many of these changes are normative.

Gordon Lathrop has recently listed eighteen changes in eucharistic practice—some of which he admits are not necessarily good.

In our time and in North America, many Christians would report these changes in the last decades: a greater frequency of communion; a stronger accent on communal celebration; more colorful vestments; a richer variety of readings from the Bible; a stronger relationship between what is read and preached and the celebration of the supper itself; a certain diminution of the accent on sin and forgiveness; a richer variety of song; more prayer for the hungry world; a clearer relationship between eucharist and food collected for the poor; the sense of the altar as a table in our midst, the presider facing us as a host across that table; a greater sense of hospitality and, sometimes, a greater sense of informality; a stronger prayer proclaimed by the presider at the table; more lay people involved in serving those who come to the table; more use of recognizable bread and full drinks of wine; more use of the posture of standing rather than the posture of kneeling for communion; a younger age for those who commune; a stronger accent on eucharist leading to mission.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Gordon Lathrop, ed., *What Is Changing in Eucharistic Practice?* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1995) 4.

If such changes have enlivened the liturgy, they have also enlivened *conversation* about liturgy and communion.

## II. A CLUSTER OF QUESTIONS

While some changes are welcome, they have also brought about a shift in identity that has provoked resistance in certain quarters. One aspect of this resistance is an abiding sense of frustration: Who says this is the way things are supposed to be? Why are such changes supposed to be implemented throughout the church when, paradoxically, the church admits that there is no need for uniformity? Has the *Lutheran Book of Worship* fallen into a unintentional but nonetheless perceptible legalism with its insistence on the regularity of certain forms, practices, and gestures? Has a certain kind of piety, specifically sacramental piety, become the norm, or even the rule, for the practice of liturgy in the Lutheran church? Does the assumed norm of holy communion add unnecessary strain on the community, particularly on occasions such as weddings and funerals when the assembly can be very diverse? Does a kind of "high church" mentality dominate to the exclusion of a broad range of practice that should characterize a church with a diverse population and background? Are the basic tenets in the teaching of worship and sacramental practice in the seminaries of the church at odds with the practice of worship in the congregations of the church where pastors are called to serve? To what extent will the conclusions reached in the ELCA's forthcoming statement, *The Use of the Means of Grace*, settle or exacerbate these neuralgic matters pertaining to the sacrament?

These questions cluster like flies on one side of the conversation, causing in turn a certain sharpness of response. For example, Gracia Grindal recently fired one of the more acrimonious salvos in an article, "On the Decline of Preaching,"<sup>4</sup> which sets a certain tone for discussion. The decline in preaching, Grindal argues, is due directly to the increasing emphasis on liturgy and frequency of communion. Such broadsides have evoked defensive responses arising both from frustration and from concern for a more balanced discussion.<sup>5</sup>

In a more irenic spirit, *The Lutheran* posed the question "Diverse or divisive?"<sup>6</sup> in such areas as age of first communion, the elements of communion, frequency of communion, the trinitarian formula, and so forth. Significantly, a recent report in an ELCA general mailing<sup>7</sup> announces that "Communion Found Not to Impede Growth." "Holy Communion," the item goes on, "is likely to be celebrated frequently in the fastest growing congregations." Concluding that the sacramental character of Lutheran worship is not an impediment to numerical growth, the report claims that "encountering Christ both in God's Word and in the

<sup>4</sup>Gracia Grindal, "On the Decline of Preaching," *Worship Innovations* 1/1 (Spring 1996) 12-14, 23.

<sup>5</sup>"Divorcing the Word from the Sacrament," *Forum Letter* 25/6 (June 1996) 1-4.

<sup>6</sup>Susan Link Olsen, "Diverse or Divisive?" *The Lutheran* (May 1996) 11.

<sup>7</sup>*Worship 96*, September 1996 (Chicago: Division for Congregational Ministries, ELCA) 2.

sacred meal may be exactly for what the unchurched in our communities are yearning.”

Quite separate from such mainstream responses has been a strong movement that has turned its back on the whole conversation—talking instead of informality, self-constructed liturgy, and even entertainment. What place, if any, will there be for communion in the “Next Church”<sup>8</sup> which, by all reports, serves communion on special rather than regular occasions? Such developments, while most apparent in the megachurches or the “Next Church,” have nonetheless had a significant impact on the overall discussion about communion. More profoundly, they have had an unsettling effect on the nature of pastoral conversation and practice with regard to both liturgy and communion.

### III. TWO POLES IN THE GROUND

Two books of comparable size have recently planted two distinct poles in the ground, each raising flags around which varying troops gather. These books are Frank Senn’s *The Witness of the Worshiping Community: Liturgy and the Practice of Evangelism* and David S. Luecke’s *The Other Story of Lutherans at Worship: Reclaiming Our Heritage of Diversity*. Senn speaks about worship from the point of view that some call evangelical catholic. His view, consistent with the rich and textured contributions of the liturgical movement, is a partial answer to those who would turn worship into entertainment for the purpose of evangelism. Senn’s book is a passionate appeal for a worship practice that is faithful to its historical roots yet true to the twin peaks of evangelism and mission.

Senn early sketches the scope of his concern.

This book is written in the conviction that there needs to be a more secure connection between liturgy and evangelism; that worship in word and sacrament should be regarded as a part of the mission of God and not just as something that aids the church in mission; that missionary dimensions are implicit in the celebration of the sacraments; that the central symbols of bathing and dining call attention to our practices of hospitality and raise the issue of inculturation of the liturgy; and that churches which take seriously the liturgy as their primary form of public witness need to develop a liturgical evangelism.<sup>9</sup>

Acknowledging that the missionary mandate is an integral part of Christ’s eucharistic presence, Senn makes a compelling case for practices recommended in *LBW* and *WOV*. He outlines the necessity of the eucharistic pattern for the purposes of renewal and mission and defends weekly celebration of the eucharist and the eucharistic consecration (including the prayer of thanksgiving) as pointing to the unity of worship and everyday life. The witness of the eucharist, according to Senn, has an important bearing on liturgical reform. “The point of reform is not to restyle our worship to make it a better evangelism tool by making it more of a mirror of our cultural fads and fancies. The point of liturgical reform is to make our

<sup>8</sup>Charles Trueheart, “Welcome to the Next Church,” *Atlantic Monthly* (August 1996) 37-40+.

<sup>9</sup>Frank Senn, *The Witness of the Worshiping Community* (New York: Paulist, 1993) 4.

worship more reflective of what the church is called to be as the people of God, the body of Christ, the herald of the kingdom, the sacrament of Christ's presence in the world, the servant of God."<sup>10</sup> Although this call for liturgical reform is based on Avery Dulles's *Models of the Church* (expanded ed., 1987), it summarizes one compelling point of view within the conversation among Lutherans regarding liturgical and sacramental practices: that reform can and should emerge from consistent sacramental practices.

Luecke's book is an equally passionate plea, presenting a case that plants an opposing pole in the ground of the current discussion. Luecke energetically raises such questions as: What is contemporary worship? What is Lutheran worship? Is there room in Lutheran worship for popular culture? Can you "go contemporary" and still be authentically Lutheran? Luecke pulls no punches and can in no way be said to share common ground with the evangelical catholic point of view. Yet, ironically, Luecke's concerns are remarkably coincident with Senn's. Luecke is committed to the linkage between worship and evangelism; he is manifestly in favor of liturgical reform; he professes to represent an authentically Lutheran confessional point of view (i.e., the other tradition); and he holds the place and practice of holy communion in high regard.

Yet the differences between Luecke's view and Senn's are dramatic and polemic. Recognizing that some participants in the current conversation are engaged in a struggle for the "soul" of Lutheranism, Luecke summarizes his case by saying that worship practice is not the part of church life where unity should be forced.

Lest there be any doubt, the purpose of this writing is not to argue that one form of worship is inherently better than another. Churches face differing circumstances and have differing emphases in mission. The intent is to make the case as convincingly as possible that there is room in authentic Lutheranism for a *diversity* of worship styles. That's why it tells the Other Story of Lutherans at worship, the one that reclaims our heritage of diversity. Such diversity can be a strength for a church body, not a weakness.<sup>11</sup>

How convincingly Luecke makes his case, one that is a pole apart from Senn's, is up to the reader to decide. When Luecke discusses the matter of communion, as might be expected, he continues to tell the other story. Like Senn, Luecke says that the missionary mandate in worship is central. But he urges a loosening of liturgical forms, the use of popular sounds in music, and even informality with regard to sartorial matters. With respect to communion practices Luecke makes a decided shift toward less uniformity as well. From his reading of certain biblical and confessional witnesses, Luecke concludes that no clear evidence supports the view that there was celebration of the Lord's supper every time early Christians gathered to worship.

So, what do we know for sure happened in the congregational worship of early

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 89.

<sup>11</sup>David Luecke, *The Other Story of Lutherans at Worship* (Tempe: Fellowship Ministries, 1995) 5.

Christians? We recognize the ministry of the Word, including preaching and instruction; singing; praying. Both of the last two would include praise. Sometimes the Lord's Supper was celebrated....Thus we have instructive examples. Yet these fall short of prescriptions for what should be included in structured worship. This is why the Lutheran confessors regarded worship rites, ceremonies, and practices as matters of indifference about which Biblically faithful Christians could differ. What is essential is presenting and responding to Christ.<sup>12</sup>

The chasm-wide differences between Luecke and Senn are both obvious and painful. The fact that the perceived high ground on each side of the chasm has been claimed in the name of biblical and confessional precedent presents both puzzle and predicament to pastors and conscientious worship leaders. The fact that both the volume and the temperature in this discussion have been turned way up is cause for concern to those seeking unity and a path to a liturgical future. Regarding one side as stifling legalism and the other as chaos and anarchy, an up-tight tilt versus a dumbing down, many in the church are left wondering what is going on and what kind of approach to take to it all.

#### IV. THE CONTINUING CONVERSATION

What is going on, of course, is a vigorous conversation regarding liturgical and sacramental matters in the church—a conversation that is parallel to and largely reflective of the ferment taking place in politics, education, the arts, and in other areas of American life.<sup>13</sup> What we should do about these conversations is to listen and be open, cultivate an attitude of humility, and develop a healthy respect and appreciation for the various pieties that comprise our Lutheran tradition. Less than helpful for pastors and other leaders in the church is the swashbuckling swordplay that passes for an honest exchange of ideas. The slash and thrust have wounded some and baffled many, while others have left the field in search of more peaceful and productive games to play.

However, retiring from the field is not an upbuilding response. Being aware of the issues in the practice of communion is critical to the effective practice of pastoral leadership. The liturgical movement and rapidly shifting conditions in the life of the church have brought about significant changes, with doubtless many more changes to come. While no one can stay on top of all those developments, a conscious engagement in the conversation may help inform the church and keep the experts honest. Knowing why some writers refuse to call communion "eucharist," for example, while others embrace the term, may help bring about an understanding of theology, practice, and what makes some folks tick. While we may not be saved by defining our terms, we can save much embarrassment and hard feelings if we are clear about what we ourselves say and what we hear others saying.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>13</sup>James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

If clarity is helpful, then some degree of humility is essential. Far too many participants in conversations about such matters as the frequency of communion convey an attitude of brittle certainty while showing discernible disdain for any differing position. Some deplore the fact that the number of congregations offering communion weekly has still to reach 25% throughout the church (though up from 16.45% in 1989), while others hope that the practice may never get beyond that point. The impression is that of a crusade: some ride confidently forth to claim holy ground, scattering the unenlightened who stand in the way.

In a suggestive little essay, "Arrogance or Rigidity,"<sup>14</sup> Henry Horn observes that some who are rigidly "in pursuit of goal [take] on the face of arrogance to those who have to follow and effect the program....But rigidity in the efforts of those who pursue goals within the church seems to me something we can soften. No single program is that important—even in worship. The gifts of the Spirit spring up everywhere and always confuse the planners; and there should be room for whatever may happen under the Spirit's guidance—even the proclamation of the truly 'arrogant.'" While strongly held opinions in liturgical and sacramental matters indicate how important these matters are, it would be better and more helpful if those varying views were publicized in a manner that allowed others to think things through rather than feeling forced to conform to the program.

Finally, one of the most significant factors in the current conversation is the unresolved clashing of pieties. For much of our history Lutherans have engaged in pulse-raising conversation. But when the dust settled, accommodation—usually drawn along a regional or synodical basis—somehow followed. Now, however, we are an emerging national church, and in many ways (communion practices being one of them) we have not yet found a way to live gracefully with our differences. We always seem to be swatting flies. When, for example, current worship resources talk about the fourfold shape of the communion rite, a chorus of voices from another part of the church (who see the shape in a different way) feels outflanked. When it is concluded that the words of institution are to be uniformly set within the context of the great thanksgiving, querulous voices insist on knowing who reached that conclusion and why. When some leaders object to certain matters like frequency or liturgical format, others in the conversation reply that this would amount to dismantling the authentic Lutheran tradition and the ecumenical consensus.

Pastors, church musicians, and other church leaders are inexorably drawn into such conversations, for they have an undeniable role to play in how communion practices are shaped in the local congregation where the life of the church really is. If we were willing to be more sensitive to the various pieties that underlie our respective styles and practices, we might experience a more vital atmosphere in the worship life of the church. The old adage about catching more flies with honey may well apply to the community that gathers for word and sacrament. "As

<sup>14</sup>Henry Horn, "Arrogance or Rigidity," in *Thoughts from the Fountainside* (Munich: Hannes Press, 1996) 182.



a means of grace Holy Communion is that Messianic Banquet at which God gives love and forgiveness, faith for our daily work and ministry in the world and a sure and certain hope of the coming resurrection to eternal life."<sup>15</sup> In spite of continued revision in the draft statement on the practice of word and sacrament, and in spite of continuing change in the practice of holy communion, the sacrament of unity, there should always be room at the table for a diverse population in need of the nourishment of Christ's presence. In the end Turton's hymn (*LBW* 206) may be the most salutary voice in the conversation:

So, Lord, at length when sacraments shall cease,  
May we be one with all your Church above—  
One with your saints in one unbroken peace,  
One as your bride in one unbounded love;  
More blessed still, in peace and love to be  
One with the Trinity in unity. ⊕

<sup>15</sup>*A First Draft: The Use of the Means of Grace* (Chicago: ELCA, 1995) 3:22, p. 23.