

DAVID A. ROOZEN & JAMES R. NIEMAN, EDITORS

CHURCH, IDENTITY, AND CHANGE

THEOLOGY AND DENOMINATIONAL
STRUCTURES IN UNSETTLED TIMES

The Theological Meaning and Use of Communion: The Case of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod

Eugene W. Bunkowske

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CHURCH, IDENTITY, and CHANGE

*Theology and Denominational Structures
in Unsettled Times*

Edited by

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The Theological Meaning and Use of Communion: The Case of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod

Eugene W. Bunkowske

Communion with its configuration of subsidiary meanings has always been an important theological concept in the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LC-MS). Today, the diverging LC-MS practices of communion and the differing theologies behind those practices are giving rise to conflict and confusion in the LC-MS, particularly in the understanding of fellowship. In this essay I will focus on both the meanings (theologies) and the practices of communion. In order to give perspective this essay will document the author's personal understanding of changes in LC-MS communion culture (practice and theology) as they have taken place during the middle and latter part of the twentieth century.

The goals of this essay are several. First, I wish to expose the meaning and practice of communion in the LC-MS especially from a dynamic interactive (transactional) point of view, and to provide a clear picture of how the language of theology orchestrated by communicating people is used to develop, organize, change, and reorganize the meaning and practice of communion. The second goal is to describe the relationship between changes in the meaning and practice of LC-MS communion culture and the changes in the sociocultural patterns of society. The third goal is to present conclusions and recommendations, including examples of how, given the findings on communion culture and sociocultural change, the LC-MS can best reorganize for crisp, clean, and clear proclamation of the good news of Jesus in the twenty-first century. The fourth goal will be to recommend how the proper understanding and use of the language of theology fit into the overall picture of organizing for God-pleasing and productive religious work in the twenty-first century. The final paragraph of the essay offers my personal opinion that Christianity will intentionally reorganize for the benefit of an organic and apostolic movement for congregational

multiplication with a focus on Jesus the Christ in order to survive and thrive in the twenty-first century and beyond.

Definitions

To open the way for a useful theological discussion on communion, it will be helpful to define carefully what we mean by theology. A friend once said, "Communion theology is in the pastor's and professor's head, and the practice of communion is transacted in the head, heart, and life of the ordinary Christian." Theology sets forth in a proper arrangement what God has revealed about himself in his word. The dictionary speaks of theology as the language about God, the meaning of God, the study of God, the relation between God and the universe, and the study of religious doctrines. It also speaks of theology as a specific form or system for the study of religious doctrines as expounded by a particular religion, denomination, or individual.

From God's side, with a monotheistic understanding in view, the meaning, knowledge, study, and explanation of God and his relationship to all things will be one, not many. From the human point of view, there are as many theologies as there are religions, denominations, and even individuals involved in doing theology. This is especially true as we focus on theology in the normal transactions of life, "real theologies," as a colleague has called them. In this essay I will designate theology as either formal or transactional.

Formal theology is a system of doctrines proclaimed to be true by a religious group. These dogmas are recognized and passed on from generation to generation. Traditionally this transmission has been done orally. In a good number of cases these doctrines are standardized, formalized, and reinforced in writing. An example of written formal theology for the LC-MS is the 1580 *Book of Concord*.¹ This volume contains the mutually agreed upon confessions of the Lutheran electors, princes, estates, and theologians of the Reformation era. These confessions are still subscribed to by Lutherans, especially Lutheran clergy, who normally make a formal subscription to them at the time of their ordination. Another example of formal theology is a text like *Christian Dogmatics* by Franz Pieper.²

Transactional theology is quite different from formal theology. It is something that every member of a religious congregation, judicatory, district, synod

1. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Charles P. Arand and others (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).

2. Franz Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 4 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1950-57).

or denomination is involved in by virtue of being a member. Transactional theology is interactive. It is theology played out in the lives of people in contact with one another and, at times, in confrontation and even conflict. Transactional theology happens as people informally discuss the merits of evolution and creationism. It happens as people talk and argue through their views on moral and ethical issues. It happens, without words, as one person watches another person receive too much change in a financial transaction and observes that person count the change and accept it without comment. It happens as people profess one thing and do another.

For Christians transactional theology is interacted between themselves, Jesus, and other people. It is living in, with, for, and through Jesus in a messy world. It is Jesus living in, with, for, and through the Christians in his body in and for that messy world. Transactional theology is by definition theology in action. It is informal rather than formal. It is doctrine in practice. It is thought and talked. It is part of almost every idea, word, and act, secular or sacred. It is an understanding of God and how that understanding is modeled and molded in everyday life. Transactional theology is dynamic and real in practical living. It is basic to the organization or disorganization, development or disintegration of religious work in the twenty-first century.

Transactional theology has several functions, but two are especially important. The LC-MS speaks of them as Christian nurture and Christian outreach. These functions can each be carried out positively or negatively. From the nurture point of view positively considered, transactional theology is God embracing us with forgiveness, admonition, and love so that we can likewise embrace others with forgiveness, admonition, and love. It is using the Christian's most holy faith to grow together as a group of believers (Jude 20). It happens when believers stop judging, as they remove the splinter from their own eye before trying to take the sawdust out of another person's eye (Matt. 7:1-5). It happens when Christians show mercy to those who have doubts (Jude 22). It happens when they are sympathetic, kind, humble, gentle, and patient (Col. 3:12). In essence, the positive function of transactional nurture theology is the Spirit of God building up the body of Christ into a place where God lives and moves and has his being (Eph. 2:22). Transactional theology of the nurture variety is carried out negatively, however, when a Christian fellowship emphasizes internal denominational nurture to the exclusion of people that Christ came to seek and save. It also happens when those who have already received that salvation in trusting faith are considered distant or heterodox, or are understood to be second-class Christians because they are members of a different Christian organization or denomination.

From an outreach point of view positively considered, transactional theol-

ogy moves out from where God already has a place in human lives and embraces others who are seeking and searching for life with God. It has to do with leaving one's comfort zone. It also means embracing the one who may not even be seeking and searching but are in need of what they do not even know. Ideally, it is taking a Christian lifestyle and message into the rough-and-tumble world without intentionally alienating others or compromising the truth of God's message. Positive transactional theology of an outreach variety is crisp, clean, and clear when it brings biblical truth to bear upon life in a messy world. This happens when Christians make it a point to interact and make friends with people in physical and spiritual need. It happens when Christians live and share their Christian faith with people from another culture or religious persuasion. It happens as a Christian learns another language in order to communicate in someone else's comfortable frame of reference. It happens as the death and resurrection of Christ saves and secures people and flows through those same people to others who are not yet saved in ways that they can understand in their own terms of reference. Transactional theology of the outreach variety is carried out negatively, however, when the message of Christ's coming to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10) is not heard in and through Christians for meaningful understanding.

Transactional theology will be very important in this essay precisely because it is in the rough-and-tumble of doing theology in life in a messy world that questions concerning organization and fellowship cry out for attention. These challenges of organization and fellowship are also being lifted up for careful consideration in a variety of churches as we move into a new millennium with its plethora of uncertainties and challenges.

The LC-MS Culture of Communion

The language of theology connected with communion was an important issue at the 1998 national convention of the LC-MS. At first glance, the problem seemed to be the practice of communion. Delegates expressed their opinions and positions on communion practice in terms of close(d) or open communion, with close(d) communion being defined in ways that excluded people, particularly nonmembers of LC-MS. Open communion was defined in a way that allowed all believers, no matter what their denomination, to participate in communion.

In the convention workbook there were thirty-five resolutions on communion from forty-three different LC-MS entities.³ When carefully examining

3. *Convention Workbook* (St. Louis: Office of the Secretary, Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, 1998), pp. 153–65.

these resolutions, it soon became evident that beneath the diverging communion practices were significant differences in theology as evidenced in the language of theology being used. In fact, biblical exegesis, meaning, interpretation, and subsidiary meanings were pivotal in how these resolutions were written.

At one point during the convention, I took a closer look at the various resolutions on communion. As I made notes in the margins of the convention workbook, I found that these resolutions had been submitted from all over the United States. They came from 34 of the over 6,200 congregations, 3 of the 35 districts, 2 of the 625 circuit forums, both of the seminary faculties, 1 of the 35 district boards of directors, and 1 of the 35 district pastoral conferences, for a total of 43 entities. Twelve of the 43 came from so-called saltwater districts, those that touch the Gulf of Mexico or the Atlantic or Pacific Oceans. Twenty came from the so-called heartland districts, those that do not touch an ocean or the Gulf of Mexico and are close enough to the triangle formed by St. Louis, Fort Wayne, and Minneapolis to be considered heartland. The remaining 11 resolutions were from areas that are neither saltwater nor heartland districts.

Most interesting was the configuration of meaning in these resolutions and the theological language that expressed that meaning. A simple review disclosed twenty-seven different types of overall communion meaning.⁴ Con-

4. These twenty-seven types of surface structure meanings of communion are listed below by descending frequency of occurrence. Each type of meaning is followed by brackets containing a number and a percentage. The number indicates how many of the forty-three participating entities used this meaning in their resolutions, while the percentage indicates the proportion of participating entities this number represents.

1. Communion is a method for defining a specific community of believers. [36/84%]
2. There are specific denominational requirements for believers who participate in communion in the LC-MS. [31/74%]
3. Close(d) communion is mandatory in LC-MS congregations. [30/70%]
4. Communion is a key designator of separation from all that are not in altar and pulpit fellowship with the LC-MS. [28/65%]
5. Discernment of Christ's true body and blood is necessary in communion. [22/51%]
6. Communion protocol is to be enforced by the LC-MS national president. [21/49%]
7. Worthy and unworthy reception of communion is a key factor in deciding who should go to communion in LC-MS congregations. [20/47%]
8. Communion protocol is to be enforced by the LC-MS district presidents. [19/44%]
9. The sacramental nature of communion is a key factor in deciding who should go to communion in LC-MS congregations. [18/42%]
10. Open communion is to be rejected in LC-MS congregations. [14/36%]
11. Confusion and contradiction are created in the LC-MS by differences in congregational communion theology and practice. [12/28%]
12. Communion protocol is to be enforced by each LC-MS pastor. [11/26%]

sidering these types was much like looking at the proverbial elephant from a number of different perspectives. Each resolution had its own configuration of meanings. These meanings overlapped with the meanings in other resolutions but tended to lean in one major meaning direction or another. Some but not all of these meanings were put forward for consideration in a given resolution. Some meanings were reinforced by other meanings, while others seemed to contradict other meanings. One insight that emerged is that in the "Whereas" sections of the resolutions, the language of theology was used to push one or more meanings into focus for major consideration.

My intention with these data is to tabulate explicit meanings only. In evaluating these meanings of communion, it is important to recognize that simply because a meaning was not made explicit in a resolution does not mean it was excluded by the framers of that resolution. "Discernment of Christ's true body and blood is necessary in communion" (meaning 5) appeared in 51 percent of the communion resolutions. On the basis of this finding, however, it would be

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13. Communion is an integrated part of the spiritual care function of LC-MS pastors. [11/26%]
 14. Forgiveness of sins is a key factor in deciding who should be admitted to communion. [11/26%]
 15. The benefit of communion understood as a totally free gift from God is a key factor in deciding who should be admitted to communion. [9/21%]
 16. Uniformity in communion theology and practice is a key factor in deciding who should be admitted to communion. [9/21%]
 17. Self-examination in communion theology and practice is a key factor in deciding who should be admitted to communion. [8/19%]
 18. The concept of being well prepared for communion is a key factor in deciding who should be admitted to communion. [7/16%]
 19. Communion participation as public confession of what is being taught in the LC-MS is a key factor in deciding who should be admitted to communion. [7/16%]
 20. There are no specific denominational requirements for believers to participate in communion in the LC-MS. [7/16%]
 21. The intention of amending one's sinful life is a key factor in deciding who should be admitted to communion. [6/14%]
 22. Discernment of oneness with all believers in Christ is a key factor in deciding who should be admitted to communion. [6/14%]
 23. Outward unity with all believers in Christ is a key factor in deciding who should be admitted to communion. [4/9%]
 24. Worthiness defined by the desire to participate in communion is a key factor in deciding who should be admitted to communion. [3/7%]
 25. Unity with Christ and his goals and purposes is a key factor in deciding who should be admitted to communion. [3/7%]
 26. Communion protocol is to be enforced by the national synod of the LC-MS. [3/7%]
 27. Close(d) communion is to be rejected in LC-MS congregations. [3/7%]

inappropriate to say that 49 percent of the framers of these resolutions denied that the discernment of Christ's true body and blood is necessary in communion. The point instead is that 51 percent explicitly said they believed it while the remainder did not indicate whether they believed or denied it. The value of these data for this essay is to note which meanings were explicitly mentioned and how they shaped the overall communion meaning of a resolution compared with that of another resolution. Moreover, resolutions that did not mention a certain meaning or firmly contradicted a meaning by choosing its opposite are helpful because they expose the emerging oppositions discussed later in this essay.

These twenty-seven meanings of communion are like the players on a stage. Each meaning can be featured at a variety of positions on that stage: front, center, back, retiring, or retired. Obviously, the front of the stage places the chosen meaning in the spotlight to be most noticed in the communication process. In the process of front-focusing one meaning, other meanings are pushed into the background, given a less noticed or totally unnoticed position rather than being highly recognized on the stage of communication. An example of foregrounded meaning takes place in overture 3-02.⁵ The eleventh "Whereas" of that resolution states that "The practice of close(d) Communion was officially and publicly taught and observed by the early church." The first "Resolved" further states "That the LC-MS in its 1998 synodical convention reaffirm its practice of close(d) Communion." This resolution neatly foregrounds "Close(d) communion is mandatory in LC-MS congregations" (meaning 3), while "Close(d) communion is to be rejected in LC-MS congregations" (meaning 27) stands totally in the background.

Shared versus Weighted Meanings

We have already seen that the meanings of communion in LC-MS circles are many. It may be possible for two parties to identify a number of those meanings and even agree that communion includes those meanings and no additional ones. A case in point was a dinner conversation about communion that occurred on the second evening of the 1998 synodical convention. As the conversation began, we agreed to identify communion meanings that were held in common by us all. We very quickly agreed upon meanings that were very similar to thirteen I had noted in the convention workbook.⁶ At this point in the

5. *Convention Workbook* (1998), p. 153.

6. These thirteen meanings were types 1, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 21, 23, and 25 listed in n. 4 above.

conversation, mutual understanding looked hopeful as more and more points of commonality on communion were shared. When no more common meanings were to be shared, however, the conversation faded. A pregnant pause followed, along with a hesitant search for a way to continue the theological transaction on communion.

One man finally took the leap. As he spoke it became apparent that "Outward unity with all believers in Christ is a key factor in deciding who should be admitted to communion" (meaning 23) was more important to him than all the other meanings. For this man, communion was a way of showing that he was in fellowship with all other Christians. The details of other people's faith were not so important for him as long as those persons desired to participate in communion. A woman in the conversation made it plain that she also gave more weight to one of the meanings than the others. However, her most important meaning was, "The benefit of communion understood as a totally free gift from God is a key factor in deciding who should be admitted to communion" (meaning 15). Her view was that unless people really understood that they were saved by grace alone, they should not participate in communion. She also believed it was the duty of each pastor to see that a person did not participate in communion unless that pastor was absolutely sure the communicant understood and believed in free grace.

So far in this case, we can see that while many of the same meanings may be shared, the weight or importance given to certain of the meanings also counts in doing transactional theology. If this weighting is not given legitimacy in theological conversation, the communication can easily become explosive, producing more emotional heat than intellectual light. The key to success in such conversational contexts is that commonly accepted rules for theological exchange must take the foregrounding and weighting of meanings just as seriously as the matter of which meanings are shared.

We return to the dinner conversation. The participants next edged beyond common meanings of communion to meanings that were not shared by everyone in the group. It was soon evident that these meanings were diagnostic: that is, they gave clear signs of differences in communion practice and theology. A delegate from Iowa related an experience in which his brother came from California to visit and was refused communion in the delegate's local LC-MS congregation. With this in mind, he said that in addition to the meanings agreed upon so far, he would have to add at least one more meaning. This took a form similar to "There are no specific denominational requirements for believers to participate in communion in the LC-MS" (meaning 20). As a result of this additional diagnostic meaning, the conversation on communion became quite animated. A friend of the Iowa delegate, also at table, said, "How can you

say that? We all know that there are specific denominational requirements for communion in the LC-MS [cf. meaning 2]. We also believe that going to communion is a public confession of what is taught and believed in the LC-MS [cf. 19]. How can you seriously think that your brother should be allowed to go to communion in your congregation? I know for a fact that he left the LC-MS because he does not believe that the true body and blood of Jesus are present in communion [cf. 5]. In addition to that, he believes that there is no connection between sinful living and going to communion [cf. 21]. That is why we have closed communion in the LC-MS [cf. 3].”

This portion of the conversation reveals that in addition to the overlapping, shared meanings, there are often additional diagnostic meanings that are latent but left unmentioned. On the other hand, with another set of people these latent meanings might always be brought up for reasons of conscience but without any reference to the shared meanings of communion. These latent diagnostic meanings often are opposed to others or are given an opposing slant. Therefore, other diagnostic meanings are viewed as unacceptable and become points of direct confrontation and disagreement. This is exactly what happened between the friends just mentioned. Their friendship has since cooled, and an unhealthy separation has taken the place of regular fellowship.

The transactional differences in communion theology that took place in the halls and restaurants of the 1998 LC-MS convention, together with the differences displayed in the convention workbook, must be taken seriously. Both the transactional and the formal differences have given rise to ongoing strained relationships between LC-MS members, which in turn provide a fertile basis for unkindness, injustice, discord, institutional problems, and organizational disunity and damage. At the same time, with a sincere desire to work toward mutual understanding, transactional communion theology can provide a fruitful forum for intentionally surfacing and consciously recognizing theological diversity. Solutions can then be sought by carrying on the conversation in a context of respectful listening and careful articulation, especially when this communicating is done on the basis of Scripture, the historic practices and confessions of the church, and the study of how positive solutions have previously been reached in similar situations of theological diversity and complexity.

Worldview (Presuppositional) Meanings

Theological meanings, including the crisp, clear, and clean communication of God’s law and gospel at the crossroads of uncertain and messy situations of everyday life, are foundational to Christian existence. These theological mean-

ings, including meanings about communion, are the logical linkages that organize and drive rationality and connect human thinking with human actions. In terms of a Christian's understanding of theological reality, they are fundamental and indispensable. In addition, the meanings in transactional theology make possible the consistent communication of deeply held beliefs and values to other human beings.

Since there are different meanings (some foregrounded, others backgrounded, some weighted, some diagnostic), and since they can be assigned different levels of importance by different groups of people, the concept of worldview is helpful. Paul Hiebert describes worldview as "the basic assumptions about reality that *lie behind* the beliefs and behavior of a culture."⁷ From my perspective, Hiebert is talking about meaning, saying worldview provides a coherent rationale for arranging and valuing multiple meanings. Worldview is therefore a basic tool for doing theology, and theology is essentially a kind of worldview.⁸ It is a way to identify the fundamental importance that certain meanings have in the theological configuration of a person or group. These important meanings also serve as controllers and organizers for a person's or group's way of thinking and living. By way of definition, we can say that a worldview meaning is a single, primary, and foundational meaning that is used to anchor and ground a concept like communion and that serves to shape, limit, and focus the other meanings of a concept like communion.

Because of their foundational nature, worldview meanings are fiercely held. When held in common, they are a powerful basis for vital and united community thought and action. When, however, a fiercely held worldview meaning stands opposed to a worldview meaning dear to another person or group, there is powerful potential for division and conflict. Once people have used the language of theology as an instrument for separating into groups, meaning tends to lose its transferability and, at the same time, clear and unambiguous definitions and helpful clarifications are very difficult to achieve. Such separation leads to stronger insistence upon preferred terms and specified interpretations of those theological terms. People also become rigid about

7. Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), p. 45, emphasis mine.

8. Theology is a kind of worldview, a basic ingredient of human meaning systems. Theological understandings serve as a primary prism through which people evaluate and arrange other meanings as they conduct their theology in everyday life. Their theological worldview meanings automatically organize and control significant parts of their lives. These theological meanings may be spoken or unspoken, consciously or subconsciously held, but they are ever present guides to how life is thought about, talked about, and lived out in everyday relationships.

foregrounded, weighted, and diagnostic meanings. They tend to use their worldview meanings for evaluation when listening to others, which often leads to almost total inability to understand with an open mind what others are trying to say. At this point in the cycle of communication, we can also see the influence of sociocultural inertia, the human tendency to establish and live in comfortable in-groups at the expense of out-groups that produce discomfort. In such cases the language of theology is no longer a loyal servant but a deceitful troublemaker. It has become a divider and a destroyer of the peace, a tool for demolishing the harmony so important for unified organizational progress in any group, congregation, judicatory, district, synod, or denomination.

It is important to recognize that people are frequently unaware of their personal or group theologies. Even when their theological meanings appear certain and fixed in a hierarchy that is firmly based on a foundational worldview meaning, people are often unable to say clearly which meaning is most important in a particular theological position, let alone name all the meanings in that position. Indeed, at the subconscious level the number and order of theological meanings and the foundational worldview meaning may be quite different from those at the conscious level, especially for a concept like communion.

Silo 1 and Silo 2 Meanings

The intensity of the convention discussion on communion made sense to a number of LC-MS members that I will call either “silo 1” or “silo 2” thinkers. Each group discussed communion on the basis of different foundational worldview meanings.

“Communion is a key designator of separation from all that are not in altar and pulpit fellowship with the LC-MS” (meaning 4) is the foundational worldview meaning for a silo 1 theology. In silo 1 communion is basically a *marker of close fellowship* with those who share their foundational worldview meaning. At the same time, it is a *marker of separation* from all Christians who are not in pulpit and altar fellowship with the LC-MS, no matter what their beliefs about Jesus as Savior may be. For silo 1 thinkers, “Discernment of Christ’s true body and blood is necessary in communion” (meaning 5) and “Forgiveness of sins is a key factor in deciding who should be admitted to communion” (meaning 14) are also important. This is not to say that additional communion meanings are never present in silo 1 thinking, but rather that they are rarely if ever explicitly expressed even as middle or backgrounded meanings.

Silo 1 communion culture understands Christian fellowship not from a

relationship and reconciliation point of view but primarily as separation from heterodox people. Pure doctrine for this group operates in a splintered theological system that makes it possible to place what the Scripture says about relationships and reconciliation almost totally in the background. It desires to use structures and laws to create unity and eliminate tension. It defines the practice of communion in formal, legalistic, black-and-white terms by shaping, limiting, and organizing worldview meaning. This communion culture sees the LC-MS as the world's best if not only hope for the future of Christianity.

Much of the basis for silo 1 communion practice and theology is exemplified in overture 3-18.⁹ The second "Resolved" of this resolution reads, "Resolved, that the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod in convention reaffirm our stance, [of] continuing to restrict our altars to such as are in confessional fellowship with the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod." I also vividly remember the times on the floor of the LC-MS conventions in 1983, 1989, and 1998 when silo 1 communion practice and theology was transacted with vigor. This view also regularly comes out in private conversations, as it did during a heart-to-heart talk with a dedicated LC-MS pastor and his wife, who said to me, "Purity of doctrine and practice are what the LC-MS is all about. Surely we cannot have communion fellowship with heterodox people who are not members of the LC-MS. The LC-MS must keep its doctrine pure. If it does not there is little hope for the survival of biblical Christianity in the world today."

The foundational worldview meaning for a silo 2 communion theology is, "There are no specific denominational requirements for believers to participate in communion in the LC-MS" (meaning 20). For this group, communion is basically a *marker of oneness* with all others who believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior, no matter what their denominational affiliation may be. Silo 2 thinking also includes belief in the real presence, salvation through the forgiveness of sins, intent to examine and amend one's sinful life, and the willingness and ability to share a common faith and confession of that faith.¹⁰ Silo 2 com-

9. *Convention Workbook* (1998), p. 159.

10. An unpublished document entitled "Celebrate (Pentecost 1996): Who Determines Worthiness at the Supper?" was prepared by a committee as a declaration of eucharistic understanding and practice for a meeting at Boca Raton, Fla. It reflects much of silo 2 communion theology. (Extrabiblical references are to Lutheran confessional documents in *The Book of Concord*, supra n. 1.)

- Christians are to realize that when they come together in the Lord "as church" (1 Cor. 11:18), the responsibility for self-examination and discernment obviously lies with the individual believer (1 Cor. 11:28).
- We believe, teach and confess that those who cherish and honor the Sacrament will of their own accord urge and impel themselves to partake of the body and blood of their Savior. (Large Catechism V.43) The clear words of Christ to remember his

munion culture understands Christian fellowship primarily as relationship and reconciliation. Pure doctrine also operates in a splintered theological system that foregrounds what the Bible says about relationships and reconciliation, while placing in the middle or background other theological issues and doctrinal teachings that emphasize a separation from those that add to or subtract from the Christian faith. This communion culture has a strong focus on context and change, and is increasingly aware of postmodernism in which Christianity is no longer the only culturally acceptable religious alternative. Members who espouse silo 2 are intensely aware that the LC-MS lives amidst those who may seek spiritual things and yet minimize or reject Christ as the Son of God and the Savior of the world. Their fear of relativism pushes them toward open fellowship with all Christians, especially evangelical Christians, for whom Christ is still central to religious beliefs and practices.

Silo 2 communion culture has a bit larger theological circumference than the communion culture of silo 1. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that silo 2 explicitly includes belief in the real presence, self-examination, repentance and forgiveness of sins, intent to amend life, and commitment to share a common faith and confession.¹¹ This point of view is becoming more popular

salvational death are both precept and command which enjoin the celebration upon his people. (Large Catechism V.45) But we are not granted liberty to despise the Sacrament. (Large Catechism V.49)

- We reject and condemn the notion that we are to act distantly toward the Sacrament, neglect it, or grow cold and callous toward it. (Large Catechism V.67)
- We reject and condemn the belief and practice that the congregation, the celebrating pastor, the church body, or the denomination has the right to impose additional restrictions upon the believer and presume the right of examination clearly imposed upon each believer (1 Cor. 11:17-34).
- We believe, teach and confess that there is only one kind of unworthy guest; namely those who do not believe (John 3:18).
- We believe, teach and confess that no genuine believer who retains a living faith will receive the Sacrament to condemnation. Christ gave us the Supper for Christians who are weak in faith, but repentant, in order to comfort and strengthen their weak faith. (Formula of Concord, Epitome, VII.18)
- We believe, teach and confess that the entire worthiness of guests at the heavenly feast consists solely in the most holy obedience and complete merit of Christ, not in our own virtue or preparation. (Formula of Concord, Epitome, VII.18)
- We believe, teach and confess that neither Scripture nor the Confessions impose a denominational or synodical requirement on baptized Christians who desire to confess the Real Presence and receive the body and blood of Christ offered in the Eucharist.

11. These attributes of silo 2 communion culture are exemplified in overture 3-06, *Convention Workbook* (1998), p. 155. The first "Resolved" reads, "Resolved, That we affirm our Synod's position relating to the practice of the administration of Holy Communion, which rec-

in LC-MS circles. I hear it regularly in pastoral conferences and from the students I teach at the seminary.

Two things can be said in summary. First, silo 1 communion theology almost totally background what the Scripture says about relationships and reconciliation. On the other hand, silo 2 tends to background what the Scripture says about theological issues and doctrinal teachings that emphasize the separation from those that add to or subtract from the Christian faith. The communion theology of both groups is guilty of splintering fellowship within the LC-MS to the extent that these theological systems come into direct and divisive conflict with each other.

Secondly, there is the problem about the language in which transactional theology is done. The Carlson sociological case study (pp. 263-93) has pointed out that “while those who employ a more traditional language continue to view unionism as the greatest threat to fellowship, those who employ a more contemporary language view relativism as the greater threat.” (“Unionism” in this quote stands for relationship with the heterodox.) My own research indicates that in doing transactional communion theology, silo 1 approaches employ traditional language while silo 2 approaches employ contemporary language. The result is that silo 1 and silo 2 people often identify each other as the enemy on the basis of language usage alone. The lines are therefore drawn, and conclusions about theological correctness are prematurely made on the basis of the contrast between church language and contemporary language, traditional liturgy and contemporary liturgy, and older Bible translations over against more contemporary ones. In reality, these conclusions are often reached even before the theological issues have been put on the table for discussion.

A Third Group of Meanings

An additional finding that emerged from this study is the existence of yet another very significant group of LC-MS members who bear a third communion culture. This third culture centers on a holistic communion theology. I have seen it most frequently in congregations that are over fifty years old where family members have tended to stay near home from generation to generation, cherishing many of the communion traditions of their ancestors. For this sig-

ognizes that the Sacrament is for all Christians who are able to examine themselves and who share a common faith and confession.” See also the fourth “Whereas” of overture 3-04, p. 154, which reads, “A practice congruent with Scripture and the Confessions calls for the Sacrament to be shared with baptized Christians who repent of their sins, believe the real presence, and sincerely intend to amend their lives.”

nificant but ordinarily quiet and cooperative group, the intensity and ill feelings connected with the communion discussion at the 1998 synod convention were unnecessary, upsetting, disconcerting, and discouraging. Some of these people have already addressed the upset, discouragement, and insecurity by leaving the LC-MS.

In this holistic approach the theology of communion is important and indispensable but not primarily focused on fellowship. Being secure and at peace with fellow congregational members of the same background and tradition is far more important. Communion is not a concept that is consciously defined. Instead, communion is part of what it is to be Christian and Lutheran. It is also not something about which to become exercised, have a bad conscience, or ask too many questions. This third communion culture is best seen as a configuration of fairly equally held communion meanings in a broad field of meaning. It does not focus on just one worldview meaning but rather includes seventeen of the twenty-seven meanings gleaned from the 1998 convention workbook.¹² Most of these meanings were and still are patterned across the stage of communion meanings with no one meaning being foregrounded at the expense of the other meanings of communion. Normally, people who hold this holistic communion theology feel free to configure these communion meanings according to their own preferences.

People within this communion culture have lived with this holistic and comfortable understanding of communion for generations. It is their sociological and relational home. They are not splitters but groupers. They enjoy living in a secure Christian environment. For them, relationships, reconciliation, careful formulation of doctrine, outreach evangelism, and fellowship with all other believers in Christ are important but are not issues to be fought over. They would like to see the traditions of the LC-MS change slowly in a calm and secure context. "Calm and secure" is defined in terms of familiar pastoral care and comfortable ways of doing things, both inside and outside of formal church services.

This third communion culture is expansive. It takes the middle road, overlapping to some extent with silo 1 and silo 2. Neither unionism nor relativism is the major concern for this group. Instead, fellowship is viewed through the lens of peace and unity in LC-MS culture and life. Since the LC-MS has been preoccupied with fellowship from its beginnings, it is significant not only that silo 1 and silo 2 have chosen a worldview meaning that focuses on fellowship, but also that this holistic communion theology is oriented toward fellow-

12. These seventeen meanings were types 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 21, 22, 24, and 25 listed in n. 4 above.

ship. Each group reflects a different perspective on fellowship, however. Silo 1 seeks fellowship with those of the same denomination and especially with the comfortable part of that fellowship, and separation from all those of different denominations. Silo 2 seeks fellowship with all fellow believers in Christ, and implied separation from those who are not Christians, assessed on the basis of the centrality of Christ and biblical infallibility and inerrancy. Holistic communion theology seeks fellowship with all Christians, especially those of the same mind, heart, and tradition, and separation from those who stir up trouble and make life sociologically uncomfortable.

Of special interest is the fact that the number of people affirming holistic communion theology appears to be growing. In addition, people in silo 1 and to some extent silo 2 are becoming more vocal and strident in articulating their distinctive communion theologies. For these groups, their position on communion is most important (sometimes consciously and at times subconsciously) because it is an expression of each group's position on fellowship. The hope of silo 1 is to challenge and confront silo 2 and holistic communion theology by their way of thinking. They hope to bring unity in the LC-MS by convincing others of their doctrinal and intellectual position on communion. The hope of silo 2 has two prongs: first, to bring unity to the denomination by consolidating their communion position with others in LC-MS on the basis of a relationship of reconciliation, and second, to include the unsaved in that growing relationship by reconciliation through Jesus Christ.

For completeness, we should recognize that formal theological niceties on communion are not the main concern for many LC-MS members, including some who are intensely involved in the communion controversy. Their main concern is who is on their side and who is on the other in the fray. As each side transacts communion theology on a daily basis, the most intense adherents of silo 1 speak of doctrinal purity while the adherents of silo 2 focus on openness and respect for all other Christians. Interestingly, the theological meanings of communion that each position holds in common with holistic communion theology will normally be glossed over as each side emphasizes its opposing worldview meanings. We should also mention that in formally written communion theology in the LC-MS, the distinctive worldview meanings of silo 1 (centered on meaning 4) and silo 2 (centered on meaning 20) are either not mentioned at all or are overly magnified. This happens because the reason for formally writing theology is often either to stress one particular position in contrast to another or to gloss over all opposition in the hope of promoting unity.

Doing transactional theology also offers at least two possibilities. One possibility is for helpful breakthroughs in communication. Such breakthroughs

happen as constructive theological conversation provides a way for open listening, careful clarification, a variety of communication approaches, and time for open minds and hearts to work toward thought-provoking understanding, which in turn can lead to mutual enlightenment. The other possibility, of course, is for a total or nearly total communication breakdown with a good deal of emotional heat. The point is that when people have misunderstanding, miscommunication, and conflict about communion in the LC-MS, it is not a parlor game or an exercise in debate. Instead, it is an exercise in serious theology, both formal and transactional, rooted in specific kinds of worldview meanings and distinctions focused on understandings about God.

These communion discussions have also led me to notice the conscious and subconscious meanings and the attitudes of harmony, diversity, and divisiveness in relation to worldview meanings. Considering these factors leads to four outcomes that are relevant for this communion situation and other LC-MS organizational challenges in the twenty-first century.

1. When communion meanings operate at a subconscious level among those focused on harmony and unity, there is an opportunity for using transactional theology to discuss constructively the differences of communion theology and practice.
2. When communion meanings operate at a subconscious level among those focused on diversity and especially divisiveness, there is a serious threat to using transactional theology to discuss constructively the differences of communion theology and practice.
3. When communion meanings operate at a conscious level among those focused on diversity but not divisiveness, there is an opportunity for using transactional theology to discuss constructively the differences of communion theology and practice. Such conscious knowledge of distinctive meanings enables helpful clarification and understanding and can lead to enlightened communication.
4. When communion meanings operate at a conscious level among those focused on divisiveness, however, the opportunity for using transactional theology to discuss constructively the differences of communion theology and practice is severely limited. Instead, we should expect escalating disharmony and division because well-meaning but ideologically committed adversaries will use their conscious knowledge of distinctive meanings to create further miscommunication and misunderstanding.

Two broad conclusions can now be noted. First, the silo cultures in LC-MS communion theology are defined by meaning patterns that focus primarily

on a single worldview meaning. These primary worldview meanings for silo 1 and silo 2 are strongly foregrounded on the communion meaning stage, with only a few other meanings in the middle or background position.¹³ These middle and background meanings, although far less important, do have their place in the overall scheme of things, however. They are often used in the “Whereas” language of formal convention resolutions to pave the way for the truly focal worldview meaning in the “Resolved” sections of those resolutions.

Second, it is important to note that the separation of LC-MS members into a number of communion cultures has enabled oppositions to develop. These opposing communion cultures with their opposing transactional theologies and practices have provided handy lightning rods for divisiveness in the denomination, especially on the subject of fellowship. As fellowship issues are forcefully pushed into the center of LC-MS discussion, the presence of a third communion culture represented by holistic communion theology may well hold the key. This approach may be uniquely equipped to deal positively and evenhandedly with the issues of fellowship as we face the changing fabric of the twenty-first century. By fostering an intentional and unswerving commitment to holistic biblical theology, as well as diplomatic and peace-loving conversation as a key component to life together in the body of Christ, this culture promises to be the most successful at tackling the task of doing transactional theology, including communion theology.

LC-MS Communion Culture over Time

We have already seen that communion practice and theology had a high profile at the 1998 synod convention. The formal convention conversation on this subject and the informal give-and-take in the halls and restaurants did not emerge in a vacuum, however. Instead, discussions about communion were already becoming increasingly focused and controversial during the 1960s and afterward. This happened at least in part because the culture of communion, the way LC-MS members think about and do communion, has changed over time.

Soon after I came back to the United States in 1982 after twenty-two years

13. In the classical form of silo 1, meaning 4 takes almost absolute precedence. All other meanings, if present at all, have a much reduced status. The circumference of classical silo 1 communion theology is therefore quite small and can be best represented by a tall but narrow silo. In the classical form of silo 2, meaning 20 takes strong precedence, with any other meanings given secondary consideration. The circumference of classical silo 2 communion theology is therefore somewhat larger than that of silo 1. Even so, it is still a *silo* of meaning(s) rather than a wider field of meanings as evidenced by holistic communion theology.

of missionary service in Africa, it dawned on me that no normative communion practice existed in the LC-MS. It also occurred to me that the fairly common theological understanding of communion that had been in place in 1960 was in the process of fragmenting. This almost immediately involved me in regular conversations with all kinds of people about their practice and understanding of communion. These conversations later became more like informal interviews with LC-MS members in many parts of the United States and elsewhere in the world. In the years since these conversations began, several trends in the practice, modeling, and transactional theology of communion seem to be confirmed.

First, individual LC-MS communion practices and theologies have incrementally moved away from a broad, holistic approach in which a field of communion meanings is more or less evenly emphasized. Instead, the movement is toward a more narrow understanding of communion that focuses on one or at most a few communion meanings. As a result, many of the common communion meanings that have been the historically shared heritage of LC-MS members have been profoundly backgrounded. This reduction of the significant meanings of communion results in a number of separate silos instead of what once was a more unified field of communion meanings, both transactional and formal. Much of the integrative meaning, unifying potential, and supportive strength of communion practice and transactional theology in the LC-MS is therefore being decimated, neglected, mislaid, and even lost.

Second, silo thinking opens the door for additional theological and sociological separations in the LC-MS. In addition to the separation over communion practice, there are the "worship wars," the "church and ministry controversies," and the smoldering divisions over the charismatic movement. This tendency toward silo thinking and splintering gained momentum during the final decades of the twentieth century. In other words, these silos in communion practice and theology are a kind of concentrated instance of the larger in-group/out-group tensions over fellowship that have been with the LC-MS from the beginning. They have also become lightning rods in attempts to identify, develop, continue, and enhance differing ecclesial, financial, and political agendas in the LC-MS.

Third, the diverging worldview meanings that define various communion cultures in the LC-MS are being formalized and spoken about more openly and pointedly. As a result, transactional communion theologies are becoming more radicalized as the discussion about communion differences becomes more strident and unfriendly.

In light of these three trends, we turn now to a more detailed analysis of LC-MS communion culture as it was known in some places fifty to sixty years

ago, looking at both the practice and its accompanying theology (transactional and formal). I personally experienced this communion tradition that in many cases has never been fully known by other LC-MS members, especially younger ones. For this reason, I will describe this culture in some detail, recognizing that it has never functioned perfectly and has always been subject to sin in at least some ways.

Fifty to sixty years ago among the so-called "builder" generation, communion was a very public and communal event that occurred four and later twelve times each year. It tended to be special and set apart. It was also pervasive and dynamic. It was not individualized, internally centered grace, but communally oriented, God-centered grace. It was focused on the mystery of Christ for and in his body of believers. It was united with that body of believers who received Christ's body and blood in trusting faith for the forgiveness of sins, life (eternal and earthly), and salvation. The overall metaphor for communion was therefore that of a family meal that offered good health, especially relational health with God (on the vertical plane) and with other human beings (on the horizontal plane).

In many congregations the celebration of communion was much like the celebration of Christmas and Easter. It was a special event to be anticipated and requiring preparation. It was collective in nature and well publicized weeks in advance. There were extensive protocols included in preparation for it, many of which were done in the home and community, as well as a special order of service that set the communion service apart from the ordinary weekly service.

Communion was most often spoken of as the Lord's Supper. At its best, therefore, it clearly reflected union with Christ and the outpouring of God's love and forgiveness in which Christians rejoiced and for which they prepared. Ideally, the reception of Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper was strongly anticipated. In such situations communion was practiced with a theology that recognized that it would not be healthy or helpful to hold hidden sins, resentments, and grudges when coming to the spiritually powerful communal meal. It was totally inappropriate and in fact theologically wrong to hold back from others the love and forgiveness of God that each Christian was continually receiving. Instead, overflowing love and forgiveness to others were the expected, although not always perfected, preparations carried out through personal acts of confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Joyful participation in the Lord's Supper also tended to be a time in which community life focused on transactional theology, on the powerful and pervasive mystery of God's grace, wrath, love, and forgiveness, as well as on communal examination and reformation.

Communion was an adult reality. It was an adult way of publicly saying, "God is real and God matters in adult life." In the best of times, it was also an

adult way of saying to God and to each other, "Please forgive me." It was getting right with God and others. It was receiving the assurance of forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation from God, as well as love, forgiveness, and a strong sense of Christian community from fellow Christians. Typically, children were vitally involved as quiet and thoughtful observers. Communion was a major communal tool for socializing the young into adulthood and into commonsense civility. Often (but not always) this approach successfully taught young people the basics of God's power, love, and forgiveness, and also the appropriate response to the triune God in biblical worship, including private, family, and corporate worship.

When this communion practice was fully integrated, most of the process of communion did not take place in the church building. Instead, it culminated in the church building as the congregation gathered to share in the communion meal after days and sometimes weeks of openness to God's word and Spirit as people were getting right with others in and beyond the family. This process often led to a time of holistic sensitivity in community, a time of confession and forgiveness motivated by God's Spirit, and a time of unloading the sins of the past, both privately and, in appropriate cases, publicly. At its best, this process provided a time of mending fences and taking advantage of family and pastoral counseling and care. At such times communicants also came prepared, with the help of God and the encouragement of their Christian families, friends, and neighbors, to step forward in faith to overcome Satan's temptations, their sinful flesh, and the besetting sins in their lives.

This process often led nonbelievers to look on with interest, awe, and respect. Some were converted because they saw the power, love, and forgiveness of God in communion. One example of this that I recall involved a shopkeeper who was moved by the Spirit of God to receive Christ and be baptized, together with his family, because the father of an LC-MS family had returned stolen goods as a natural part of that family's preparation for and participation in communion.

In this collective communion process, the entire Christian community tended to become involved. By definition, there was an intentional emphasis on the consolation and mutual concern for other people. There was a deep commitment to the fact that faith was demonstrated in life. If a person's life deviated and showed an exaggerated love for money, pleasure, self, and other kinds of antisocial behaviors, there was cause for congregational concern and action. Where such sins showed themselves, it was recognized that there was manifest need for kind encouragement and loving admonition. In such a case, the congregation needed to be involved through its members and especially its elders and pastor.

As God's people responded to God's Spirit, suitable encouragement and admonition were practiced first and foremost by the appropriate people in the family, both nuclear and extended. This normally also included workers attached to businesses and farms as well as their families. It was also practiced in the natural networking of Christian friends. Men, women, and, where appropriate, children (especially older ones) were regularly involved in this communal activity. These activities of mutual encouragement were given strength and impetus as the communion process moved forward toward the spiritually centered communal meal in the gathered congregation of Christians. When the family and friendship networks, plus the natural systems of communication, were not effective in promoting Christian repentance and reconciliation, the church elders and pastor would be called on to be of assistance. Individual communion announcements with the pastor were also an integral part of the process, giving the pastor a natural channel for encouragement and admonition. This was a precious and very personal time with the pastor, a time set apart to discuss life, including the spiritual part of life.

In this intact and integrated holistic model of announcing for communion with the pastor, the announcing was done some days before the service in which the communion meal was celebrated. This happened because if it became evident during the announcement time that the communicant's conscience was burdened by sin that needed to be confessed, there was still time to go and do the confessing, not only to God but also to other persons. The result would hopefully be personal forgiveness and reconciliation. At such times it was often but not always necessary for elders, the pastor, or both to be involved in this essential communication so that Christian care could immediately be available to all parties at the time of confession and forgiveness. This part of the communion process was at times very simple and straightforward, and at other times very complex. Positive completion of complex situations often took several days and occasionally weeks, months, or even years. This was not only because it normally involved several people, but also because it took time for people in conflict, sin, and fear to work through a situation that was often quite entangled.¹⁴

14. This holistic process of communion, including complete preparation, recognized that when communal confession and forgiveness was successfully completed by the power of God's Spirit, it opened the way for needed love, forgiveness, and assurance of freedom from sin and guilt. It also naturally strengthened and fortified the kingdom of God through the building of communal oneness in Christ. All of this happened in the context of receiving full assurance of Christ's love and forgiveness by participating in the reverent mystery of sharing in the communal meal of Christ's body and blood as a body of reconciled believers in Christ. It was in every way a remembering and living in and with Christ as a fundamental part of everyday life until he comes again.

Foundational to all these communion practices was a transactional theology of communion, an understanding of God that made it natural to open oneself in community to the Spirit of God to enhance both the vertical and horizontal relations of examination, confession, forgiveness, and love. The basic idea was that communion should build community with Christ and with fellow Christians.

In many LC-MS situations today, holistic communion is no longer an option because communion has been reorganized in a way that no longer focuses on human relationships. Instead, it is understood to be strictly a spiritual, momentary event rather than a dynamic and divine interpersonal process. For this reason, the communion process leading up to the communal meal in church, once so important in LC-MS personal piety, has been de-emphasized to the point of being beyond the recollection of many.

In studying LC-MS communion thought over the past few decades, I have tried to develop metaphors that describe the two ends of the communion spectrum in our transactional communion theology. The two metaphors that have been most helpful are *communal meal* and *health supplement*. In the interview process, I asked people to identify their spontaneous, uncritical (unmarked) understandings of communion from the point of view of these two metaphors. In my estimation, the majority (although not overwhelming) of LC-MS members chose the health supplement metaphor. Men consistently chose it more often than women, as did the so-called "boomer" generation (especially the younger end of this group, born between 1946 and 1964) and "Xer" generation (born after 1965) than the builder generation (born before 1946).

A significant percentage of the participants say they have never considered the idea that communion builds relationships of loving acceptance and interconnected Christian community by confession, absolution, and forgiveness in the context of God's love and forgiveness. This is especially true of LC-MS members for whom family no longer has a high priority in everyday life. For them the horizontal understanding of the body of Christ, with its associated communal fellowship and human forgiveness, is almost completely backgrounded because there is little communal theology or practical family living to trigger it.

When I have suggested that the metaphors of health supplement and communal meal are overlapping and that both are important in biblical communion, it tends to lead to conversational heat rather than to helpful understanding and light. A good number of LC-MS members today see communion strictly as either one or the other. In addition, a significant minority of those involved in transactional communion feel uncomfortable and at times threatened and defensive when the scriptural roots of communion are introduced into the conversation.

When the discussion turns to the benefits of communion, there is a further spread of meanings ranging from benefits described as forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation to benefits described as the release of internal, personal power. At times this internal power is described as a kind of New Age release of energy rather than as a gift of God's grace.¹⁵ This point of view was most clearly expressed to me some years ago by an articulate businessman who said, "Life is heavy. I just try to get through to another Sunday. I go to church for communion. Communion resets my internal gyro. It clears my mind and activates my flagging get-up-and-go power. It gets me ready for another demanding week." The concept that the word of God is the power of God unto salvation (Rom. 1:16), and that the sustaining promises of God through his Spirit are accessible throughout the week, at any time and place, without some kind of special sacramental infusion, seemed illogical to this man. Also puzzling to him was the idea that without the word of God, communion is ordinary bread and wine.¹⁶

For such LC-MS members, the authority, meaning, and efficacy of communion do not rest on a Spirit-engendered faith relationship with God based on his words and promises, but on the communion elements and ceremonies themselves. Such people also find church services without communion to be incomplete and of less than full value. The number of LC-MS members that think this way about communion seems to be increasing. All seems well for such people if and when the communion rite is administered by the right person, in the right way, and in the right place. Each of these "rights" will normally be defined individually, independently, and internally. Certainly such people have faith, but their faith seems to be focused primarily on the forms, ritualistic processes, and pragmatic results. In such cases the understanding of communion is not communal but very individuated and personal. It focuses on what communion does for me, my desires, my energy, my attitudes, my credibility, my competence, my ability to do what is best for me, my obligations, and my responsibilities. It is perceived as a pure, potent, personal health supplement rather than as a nutritious communal meal provided by the Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins and as a support for Christian community. It is projected as individual and internal, or at best as sacramental, vertical, and personal, rather than as spiritual and sacramental with both a vertical and horizontal dimension and a powerful communal and interpersonal effect.

15. This personal energy moves beyond the idea of help and healing for guilt and sin and the gift of life in this world and the next, to the idea of superior personal performance. This benefit is seen as a kind of superior performance derived from the sacramental power that pushes a person through the activities of the week at a better level.

16. *Dr. Martin Luther's Large Catechism*, trans. John N. Lenker (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1935), p. 175.

I have tried to chronicle the unraveling and reorganizing of transactional communion practice and theology. This unraveling and reorganizing have placed great collateral pressure on matters of fellowship in the LC-MS, internally and externally, especially during the latter decades of the twentieth century. Because the foundational self-understandings, structures, and practices of the denomination were built on fellowship commitments, these strains in communion theology and practice are significant.

Since the days of the various immigrations of Lutherans to the United States, the Altenburg debate, and the founding of the LC-MS seminaries, there has been tension about how to define and express fellowship commitments. LC-MS fellowship commitments were fashioned out of a fabric of pure doctrine, faithfulness to the confessions and the gospel, and preserving that purity in relation to other theological traditions and the larger society. Today, fellowship issues within the denomination are focalized in communion practice and theology. The present communion confrontations call into question the definitions and the fabric of these same fellowship commitments.

Parallels between Communion Culture and American Culture

In order to understand further how these commitments have been threatened, we examine how sociocultural change in the larger society has contributed to contemporary denominational divisions and conflicts. In particular, I will explore five types of sociocultural change in America and how these compare with recent shifts of understanding in LC-MS communion theology.

From Communalism to Individualism

The first sociocultural change to be compared is the pervasive transition from communalism to individualism. The authors of *Habits of the Heart* document this striking sociological shift by distinguishing between communities of memory and an individualism dominated by separation and utilitarian self-expression.¹⁷ This distinction highlights how Americans have gradually moved from a primary focus on community to a primary focus on the individual. This same individualism dominated by separation has been apparent to me almost daily since returning from communally oriented Africa in 1982. The contrast

17. Robert N. Bellah and others, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), pp. 153-55.

between contemporary American individualism and my youthful memories of mutually supportive community continues to be very strong. My own cousin memorably recalled how, in the 1940s and 1950s, “we shared everything as together we grew into manhood in a cherishing extended family community.” In the 1990s, by contrast, a friend from Denver remarked, “I have gotten carried away with the bottom line of profit and loss. I hardly see my wife and children any more because it is early to work and late night meetings to keep the business spiraling upward.” When asked why he accepted the responsibility of coming to the 1998 synod convention as a delegate, he said, “I am programmed for personal responsibility and for separation. How else can one succeed?”

There is a striking parallelism in change patterns between the culture of communion and the culture of a society that has moved away from communities of memory and toward separated, utilitarian, self-expressive individualism. During this same period, many LC-MS members have moved away from a communion culture of communally oriented meal toward one of an individualized, health supplement understanding. Similarly parallel change patterns exist with respect to relationships between the denomination and individual LC-MS congregations. One overture in the 1998 convention workbook expressed this trend by saying, “Resolved, that each congregation determine its own practice and procedure for faithfully following the guidance of the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions in administering the Eucharist.”¹⁸ The Carlson case study speaks of this situation as “conflict between the central judicatory of the synod, the synodical convention and its elected leadership, and the localized districts.” This individualistic withdrawal is occurring as the supportive and communal trust relationship that was traditionally part of the LC-MS culture increasingly gives way to a culture of distrust, tension, and separation. This shows itself most clearly between local congregations and districts on one side and the synodical structures on the other side, particularly at the national level.

Separation of Public and Private

The second sociocultural change to be compared is a movement from the overlapping and complementary status of public and private to the growing separation between the two. In the first decades of the twentieth century, people did not make a major distinction between public and private. Religion was a public as well as a private matter. God looked after things very closely, not only in private space but also in the public square (Ps. 139). When my grandfather began

18. *Convention Workbook* (1998), p. 159.

his ministry in west-central Minnesota, part of his mission was to be a full-time teacher of the Christian faith in a one-room public school for two months of each school year. (Another teacher was employed to teach the other subjects during the other months of the school year.) In addition, many nonreligious functions were held in the Lutheran church. Private homes in that era were the normal places for births, anniversaries, marriage receptions, birthdays, and the first part of funeral services. Today, these events are most often held in restaurants, hospitals, commercial meeting halls, funeral homes, and churches. At the same time, so-called political correctness dictates that religious sentiments are personal and private and should be expressed only in one's home or in a church, mosque, or synagogue. Personal meditation and prayer is considered appropriate as long as it is not spoken aloud for others to hear. Prayer at meal-time, traditionally very common, is also falling into disuse.

The parallels between this sociocultural change pattern and LC-MS communion culture will be addressed after we have considered the third instance of sociocultural change.

From Spiritual to Secular, Back to Spiritual

The third sociocultural change pattern is a movement from the spiritual to the secular and now back to the spiritual. Traditionally, American culture gave an important role to the spiritual. The middle of the twentieth century fostered a separation of the spiritual from the nonspiritual. It socialized God and the spiritual into a place rather than understanding these as an integrated part of all of life. In this way of thinking, wherever God and the spiritual are, the secular is not, and vice versa. This point of view has been reinforced by a number of Supreme Court decisions, such as those concerning prayer in public schools. In the 1950s the place of the secular increased and the place reserved for God and the spiritual was institutionalized and pressured to give up more and more sociocultural space. For many, God and the spiritual were almost totally marginalized to the point that some wondered whether the spiritual still had a legitimate place in the nuclear family or even in the privacy of the home. Starting in the 1960s, however, this trend began to reverse, until now the spiritual is once again gaining ground in the public square. The secular and spiritual will therefore need to find a way to accommodate each other once again.

The second and third change patterns can be taken together as we consider the parallels between them and the culture of communion. This parallelism is striking. If the sociocultural shift has been from "God and the spiritual in both public and private space" to "God and the spiritual only in private space,"

the culture of communion for many LC-MS members has moved from “communion focused both vertically and horizontally, encompassing both public and private space,” to “communion focused primarily vertically and internally, limited to privatized church building space.”

From Holistic to Specialized

The fourth sociocultural change to be compared is the movement from the general and holistic to a sweeping commitment to specialization. Although American culture has always had a plurality of values, certain values and practices were traditionally given pride of place. However, during and since the Second World War, American society has made a continual and sweeping commitment to splitting life into a multitude of pieces, both in terms of practices and values. We have moved from a fairly universal, single pattern to several patterns, some in opposition to others. This movement has included segmentation, separation, and compartmentalization. It is reflected in the division of life into such pairs as home and workplace, work and leisure, white collar and blue collar, and general practitioner and specialist.

As with the previous three shifts, we again notice a close parallelism between this sociocultural trend and the changes in the culture of communion. Both the communion culture and the larger society have moved away from the general and holistic and toward specialization, as well as away from a single pattern and toward several patterns, as their primary way of modeling reality. In communion in particular, this has meant a movement away from a single, holistic type of communion culture with a solid set of shared meanings and toward several narrower, silo-type communion cultures.

From Heteronomy to Autonomy

The fifth sociocultural change pattern to be compared is the movement from heteronomy to autonomy. This shift is seen in the moves from faith in another to faith in oneself, from objective faith to subjective faith, and from Judeo-Christian standards to individual internal standards, sometimes akin to New Age standards. Previously it had been widely accepted that the foundational location of the spiritual was outside of humankind. Christianity located its spiritual understanding in the triune God (Gen. 1:1-2, 27), with salvation in Jesus Christ (John 14:6). As the Enlightenment in its scientific emphasis stressed what one can touch and see, the spiritual with its grounding in God gave way to

the autonomously thinking human being. Separated from the spiritual, people increasingly affirmed the rational capacity to know objective facts. The theory of evolution strengthened this faith in autonomy by making it possible and even preferable to speak of the origins and basic structures of life without reference to God or the spiritual.

Even so, the expectation that God and the spiritual dimension of life would shrivel up in the face of such scientific answers has not been realized. Instead, there is an abiding sense of the eternal in people's minds (Eccles. 3:11), and an ongoing search for spiritual reality.¹⁹ In the postmodern age, the growing sociological response has been a decline in organized religion and a parallel increase of interest in what is called spirituality. The question is no longer whether the spiritual will again recover its place, but rather how the spiritual will be understood and practiced among a growing number of people who value spiritual searching over religious certainty. Postmodernism also offers a popular worldview that speaks of each person as the repository of spiritual power, a power that needs to be recognized and released through personal knowledge and ritual manipulation. In such a worldview, personal meditation, exercises, right consumption, crystals, gurus, séances, and channeling are prominent in the media and on the lips of respected individuals. This autonomous way of interpreting reality apart from God is frequently taught in schools and promoted on television. It is the basis for the New Age movement and for many of the popular philosophies and strategies for living and prospering that make sense to many contemporary seekers and searchers.

Again we are confronted with a profound parallelism between these sociocultural change patterns and those in LC-MS communion culture. Communion standards seem to be drinking deeply from the stream of the larger society that is shifting from heteronomy to autonomy, from faith in another to faith in oneself, and so forth. The result is that many LC-MS members are also searching along a kind of trajectory that moves away from biblical standards and toward a mixed pattern combining the word of God with the changing culture and its experimentation. In this regard, I recall a conversation about religion with an LC-MS friend of one of my theological students, who said, "Religious reality is only a matter of education, of learning who I am in relation to the powers of nature within me and how to release those powers for positive and creative personal benefit." I also recall the LC-MS businessman mentioned earlier who said that communion resets his internal gyro, clearing his mind and enhancing his personal power for another week.

19. David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991), p. 476.

In all five of these sociocultural change patterns, there is a striking parallelism between changes in the culture of American society and changes in LC-MS communion culture. Voltaire is said to have suggested that people are creatures of the age in which they live, and that very few are able to raise themselves above the ideas of their time. On the basis of my findings, I would have to agree. The shifts in communion theology, so similar to those in the larger society, have appeared in both the practice and theology of communion at the transactional level and are being used extensively as tools for defining opposing positions on fellowship in the LC-MS. Of additional interest is the fact that these understandings in communion theology are now beginning to make an impact at the formal level of communion theology in the LC-MS.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Since the 1960s there has been a movement among younger boomers and especially Generation Xers away from compartmentalized individualism and toward an organic, relational fellowship in the context of emerging postmodernity. This movement has challenged the compartmentalized specialization, impersonal precision, and anonymous rigidity of corporate and institutional structures. At the same time, it has enhanced the likelihood of a more informal, integrated, personal, and contextually rooted communication and community. In this kind of situation, it is unlikely that formal expressions of private theologies will be fine-tuned and perfected. Instead, the coming years will be marked by a blossoming of interactive biblical theology transacted publicly in the messy world of our diverse contexts.

My first conclusion, therefore, is that biblical theology will more likely lean in the direction of transactional theology than of formal theology. As this trend continues into the twenty-first century, there may also be a reawakening of first-century Christianity. This kind of Christianity will show itself in a movement back toward organic structures with a high degree of commitment, risk, and personal integrity in life-giving community. The challenge will be for this reawakened Christianity to avoid being grounded in the egocentricity of the New Age movement, but instead remain firmly connected to the Christ of the Bible, transacting an open expression of what it means to be in Christ on the basis of the revealed and inerrant word of God. As this happens, Christians will increasingly transact their theology in word and deed with other people and with Jesus. This will be basic biblical theology in practice. It will be lived in, with, for, and through Jesus Christ in the messiness of human existence. This same Christ of the Bible will live in, with, for, and through dedicated Christians

who bring his body into the confusion and challenges of everyday life. Through them he will continue until the end of time his self-professed work of seeking and saving not only those who are looking for truth, life, and hope (Luke 19:1-10), but also those who are not looking at all but are greatly in need of life without end (John 3:16).

Second, based on our study of the twentieth-century LC-MS communion culture, it is predictable that the patterns for doing transactional theology and organizing religious work in the years to come will typically parallel the changing sociocultural patterns of the larger society. This seems to happen whether the patterns produce success and progress or result in regression and failure. It will take a dedicated intentionality for Christianity, including in the LC-MS, to uncouple the seemingly strong connection between shifting sociocultural patterns and those in communion culture, let alone other religious patterns. I would suggest that commitment to such disciplined intervention can succeed only when people recognize and rejoice in the Spirit of God in their lives. By Christ's authority (Matt. 28:18) and with the power of the Spirit of God (Rom. 8:12-14), alternative ways can consciously be chosen and intentionally given preference over the ever changing culture of society. Two viable models immediately come to mind for doing this kind of transactional theology during the twenty-first century.

One model is available in the theory, theology, practice, and application of the apostolic doctrine and life found in the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. This is not the apostolicity of a hierarchical church, but the apostolicity of the first disciples who saw themselves as brothers and sisters in Christ, witnesses sent by God's Spirit to testify to the Lord Jesus Christ in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the very ends of the earth. This apostolic testimony followed a costly pattern that was marked by an intentional sociocultural separation that occasionally led to suffering, persecution, and martyrdom. This model of intensely loving but also intensely truthful Christian transactional theology must receive the same priority in the twenty-first century that it had in the first. When this happens, we will again hear people say, as they did in the first century, that the followers of Jesus Christ have "turned the world upside down" (Acts 17:6). In this regard, it is also significant that many religio-cultural patterns in the first century were not very different from those we see today. The early Christians knew what they believed and how to live. Their way of life was vital and essential, not only in terms of patterns, standards, and organization, but also in terms of the survival of the faith in those early days. The same will certainly be true for Christianity in our own time.

Another, similar model of transactional theology available today is found in the example of earnest and eager believers, many of them new Christians.

Taking the Bible absolutely seriously both in doctrine and in practice, this kind of transactional theology is vibrant among many Christians in Africa, especially south of the Sahara. Their positive Christianity is vitally interested in crisp doctrine that brings clear and clean biblical truth to bear upon nurturing the believers and reaching the nonbelievers. This happens when these African Christians apply the truth of God's word in the political, economic, social, mental, and spiritual settings of their individual, family, community, and congregational lives. As with all Christianity in action, the results are sometimes marvelous and sometimes mixed.

Third, the language of theology should not obfuscate, darken, hide, dull, or confuse meaning. Instead, it should brighten, illuminate, illustrate, and clarify meaning. If the language of theology is to be a helpful servant, it must detect and highlight the subsidiary meanings within an overall meaning. When such language helps to identify the shared (commonly held), differentiating (diagnostic), and worldview (foundational) aspects of an overall meaning like communion, there results a potential for rational engagement and enlightened interaction about God. This approach to the language of theology must consciously and in good faith use available linguistic tools to achieve positive progress in Bible-centered doctrine and practice.

In the twenty-first century, it will not be sufficient to use yesterday's words and patterns to do today's transactional and formal theology. Instead, it will be necessary to crisply, clearly, and cleanly put the pure and unadulterated wine of God's meaning into new wineskins, the words and language patterns of today. This is true not only in Bible translation but also in the transactional and formal theology used in talking and writing about God. The uncritical use of church language obfuscates, darkens, hides, dulls, and confuses. By contrast, the positive use of the common language of the people, free of slang and jargon, brightens, illuminates, illustrates, and clarifies for the sake of accurate understanding. This open and engaging use of the natural expressions of contemporary language will also clear the way for all believers to think and talk about God without fear or embarrassment.

Fourth, the language of theology has the potential to make a powerful and positive contribution to organizing religious work in the twenty-first century by taking seriously the meanings of language and especially of scriptural language. In the LC-MS, this will include careful conversational work on how the meanings of communion relate to fellowship. To be most helpful, the language of theology must not become mired in questions classical or contemporary. Instead, relevant transactional theology will make a positive contribution to the organization of religious work by centering primarily on Christology and apostolicity rather than on ecclesiology. It must recognize the original scrip-

tural definition of apostolic as the image of gathered believers continually being sent to the nations (Matt. 28:16-20; Acts 1:8) as Christ's living body (1 Cor. 12:27). Such an apostolic community is specifically sent into all parts of the world to seek and save the searching and lost ones from all groups, languages, and nations (John 10:16; Rev. 7:9-10). This kind of apostolic church is organic in nature. Centered on Jesus Christ, it focuses its conversation and action on imitating Jesus. It extends the loving, compassionate, seeking, searching, and forgiving life of Christ rather than committing its energy and resources primarily to human traditions and the agendas of institutionalized ecclesiology.

Finally, Christianity will survive and regenerate in quite natural ways in the coming years as God's word, empowered by the Spirit of God, is a light to God's people (Ps. 119:105). This will lead to a reorganized brand of Christianity that is creative and ready for continuing renewal. This will happen as God's people focus on Christ and give organizational priority to God's apostolic movement for multiplication, especially the multiplication of congregations. Beholden to God's apostolic mission that all should be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2:4), this reorganization for multiplication will occur marvelously, successfully, and beautifully.

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