

COMMUNION PRACTICE IN THE EARLY CHURCH

Members of this parish have often seen the following sentences in their pew bulletins:

“By his partaking of the Sacrament in a church a Christian declares that the confession of that church is his confession. Since a man cannot at the same time hold two differing confessions, he cannot communicate in two churches of differing confessions. If anyone does this nevertheless, he denies his own confession, or has none at all.” The quotation comes at the end of chapter 14 of Werner Elert’s book, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*, tr. N E Nagel (St Louis: CPH) 1966. In the chapter he shows that the denominational divisions that we know today were present in Christianity very early. A person who wanted to join a Christian church, say, at Rome, in the early third century was confronted by a series of denominations, each claiming to represent the genuine Christian faith. Besides the Catholic Church with the bishop of Rome, there was the church under the rival pope, Hippolytus. There were the Novatians, who were orthodox except that they refused to reconcile the church people who had committed idolatry (including offering a pinch of incense before the statue of the Emperor, murder (including abortion) and adultery). There were the followers of Valentinus and of Marcion, and in some other areas there were the Montanists. Elert shows that no member could step across the boundaries of fellowship without the approval of all members. Whoever took communion with a heretic, a schismatic, or any man who for any reason was not within the fellowship thereby disqualified himself from the fellowship, Elert gives an interesting series of examples of this principle.

Between AD 482 and 519 there was a schism between Rome and the East. It arose after Zeno, the Emperor at Constantinople, promoted a compromise document in the hope of uniting the Orthodox, who supported the *Definition* of Chalcedon, and the Monophysites (those who spoke about Jesus as having only one nature). In AD 483 the bishop of Rome, Felix III, sent two legates, Vitalis and Misenus, to Constantinople to set the Emperor and the Patriarch of Constantinople to rights about the compromise document. The legates went beyond their instructions, and took communion at Constantinople. For all groups in the early church communion fellowship meant church fellowship. Communion with a heretic could take place only if a supporter of heresy first renounced the heresy. A Roman synod deprived Vitalis and Misenus of their office, and excluded them from communion.

A hundred years later, during the Persian War, many refugees from Armenia came to Constantinople under the leadership of their catholicos (bishop). At first they went to communion without any misgivings with the orthodox Patriarch at Constantinople, who supported the *Definition* of Chalcedon on the two natures of Christ. In AD 451 the church at Armenia had not been represented at Chalcedon, and they did not subsequently accept the *Definition*. However, when the bishops who had remained in Armenia and other members there reproached them about this, they separated themselves and had communion in their own services in a private house. The principle was universally recognised, that fellowship at the altar was possible only where there was confessional unity.

This principle affected clergy, too. Archbishop Theophilus of Alexandria deprived two presbyters, Peter and Isidore, from communion because Peter had admitted to communion a Manichean lady who had not previously renounced her heresy. Four Egyptian monks (the “tall brothers”) went to Constantinople to try to get Peter and Isidore reinstated. The Patriarch there, John Chrysostom, received them honourably, but would not allow them to communion until their case was investigated. Theophilus made the charge that Chrysostom had admitted them to the sacrament, though in fact he had not. However, Theophilus used the occasion against Chrysostom, and in doing so aided Chrysostom’s opponents at the court of the Emperor, and they finally secured his dismissal. The chain reaction is obvious.

Elert makes the observation that there was universal recognition of the basic principle that inadmissible altar fellowship injures the integrity of church fellowship. He points out that the practice in many modern denominations of admitting anybody “as a guest” to the Sacrament in a church of a differing confession, so that people may commune to and fro in spite of the absence of full church fellowship, was unknown, and indeed, unthinkable, in the early church.

This principle applied to all personal dissensions. The celebration of the Sacrament together is the seal of the closest and most complete relationship between human beings. Egyptian monks broke off fellowship with Simeon Stylites because he did the unheard-of thing of living on a pillar. Domnus of Antioch sought him out, and was highly impressed, and they gave each other the sacrament. That sealed their unity. After Jerome had fallen out with his friend Rufinus, Jerome reminded Rufinus in a letter that they had once communed together at the Church of the Resurrection in Jerusalem. The memory of that served only to deepen the contrast after their

bitter argument, which made communion between them impossible.

Elsewhere in the book Elert gives examples to show that this principle was well understood by lay people. If their pastor or bishop gave communion to a person who was not in fellowship on the basis of his confession, their pastor or bishop by that act excluded himself from their fellowship. Where a person communes, and whom a person communes is his confession.

When the Princess Sophia at Constantinople received the Sacrament from a Monophysite priest before her husband, Justin II, was enthroned, it was clear to everyone that she wanted to have no fellowship with the Orthodox, who accepted the doctrine of the two natures in Christ, which the *Definition* of Chalcedon had affirmed. However, when she later came into fellowship with the Orthodox, she began to take communion with them.

Elert observes that perpetual care was needed to preserve the integrity of altar fellowship. There were often churches of different confessions or churches that were divided for other reasons in the same town or province. The divisions affected both the bishops and all the members of their churches. When people travelled outside of their areas, bishops' letters of commendation and letters of peace were necessary. Travellers were in trouble sometimes outside of their local areas where such letters were not recognised, even when the divisions were ones in which they were not personally involved.

From the standpoint of the New Testament, we must observe that the practices that Elert describes were altogether faithful. Christians have the obligation to confess everything that Jesus taught (Mt 28:20; John 8:31-32). The Lord's Supper is the most intimate form of church fellowship. Those who eat the same loaf are one body in Christ (1 Cor 10:17). A person who communes in a church, without speaking a word, proclaims that he assents to everything that that church confesses and teaches. The converse is also true. It is the duty of Christians to avoid false prophets (Mt 7:15-20). False teaching has no rights in the church. Christians are bound to mark and avoid those who cause the divisions and the offences that are contrary to the doctrine that they have learned (Rm 16:17; Gal 1:8-9). Welcoming false teachers as Christian brothers makes a person co-responsible for their error (2 Jn 10-11). In Elert's words, "So long as there is anything that divides them, they may not communicate together. Any disunity carried into the celebration of the Communion does injury to the body of Christ."