

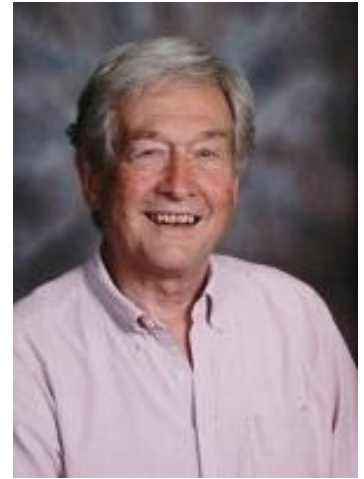
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INDISCRIMINATE WELCOME TO THE TABLE: YES OR NO?

A Longtime readers of these postings will be aware that in recent years, this parent website changed both its name and its formatting. In earlier years the name was *Lift Up Your Hearts*. Now it simply calls itself by its longtime internet address: *worship.ca*. Easier to remember.

B Further, because the formatting is also new, earlier postings – pre-2013 – at “Worship Workbench” have not been available to readers. It’s apparently a lot of work to do the re-formatting, so you’ll have to wait!

C The consequence of these changes has been that you are unable to access, for example, my earlier posting numbered 167, and dated February 2012. I titled it “All Are Welcome to Commune: Yes? or No?”

D My answer to the question in my title in that Essay was “No”. I gave what I still regard as three good reasons. Now in recent days I’ve thought of yet another new argument – a fourth – that bolsters my case.

E So I’ll take it upon myself this month to re-post that ancient Essay 167 in its entirety, with my new numbering and dating and title, adding my new insights at 16, 17, 18, 19, 20 and 21 below. I’ve re-numbered subsequent paragraphs accordingly. You still with me?

F Here it is then, my old Essay 167 re-visited and amplified.

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1 At a recent monthly meeting of Lutheran pastors in our area, I took a survey. How many pastors present, I asked, make a verbal announcement each Sunday to the effect that “All are welcome to commune in bread and cup?”

2 You will perhaps not be surprised – as I was! – to learn the results of my survey. Every pastor present, all 24 of them, raised their hands. All 24 pastors present – me excluded: I’m retired these days and sit in the pew – made precisely such an announcement.

3 Many, furthermore, had printed announcements to the same effect each Sunday in their print-piece, their guide-to-worship. I was not only surprised; I was shocked. It did not – it does not – seem to me to be a good idea.

4 I can understand the instincts of Christian hospitality that motivate such an indiscriminate welcome to the Table. Surely we want every person present, every visitor, every stranger and pilgrim in our midst, to feel at home here. We don't want to offend with unnecessary rules and restrictions. And yet...

5 And yet... I have profound misgivings about any verbal or printed announcements of indiscriminate welcome to the Table. I'll sketch them out below. And I'll put my scruples here in the form of questions, to suggest my ambivalence in the matter, although my own immediate response would be to answer yes to each of them. Bear with me. There are some weighty issues involved.

6 First: Does an indiscriminate welcome to the Table dishonour Baptism? There's a good chance it does. The Holy Communion is the Family Meal of the Baptized, and if you're not baptized, you're not yet a full member of the family. If the gates to the Table are wide open to anyone, baptized or not, we're running the risk of dishonouring Baptism. What's the point of Baptism, if everyone who comes in the door – a Muslim? A Hindu? A Unitarian? An Atheist? – is welcome at the Family Meal? The question should at least be asked among us. But see 35 D) below.

7 Almost all the Christian churches have just recently – only thirty years ago – gone through a period of revival of interest in Baptism. Our predecessor worship book, *Lutheran Book of Worship*, was constructed by scholars and pastors and laypeople who were enthusiastic about Baptism, and wanted to give it sufficient honour in that book.

8 Hence the recovery of the concept of the Communion of the Baptized – allowing access to the Table by young children, before their Confirmation, and even by newly-baptized infants. Hence the Order for Thanksgiving for Baptism as a gathering rite. I have heartily affirmed both of those refinements in our piety and practice, and argued strongly and publicly for their legitimacy. (When I was a kid, Confirmation had more weight and importance than Baptism.)

9 I'd hate to lose that new-found respect for Baptism. Does indiscriminate welcome to the Table threaten that? Again, be certain to note my qualifications at 35 D) below.

10 Second: Does indiscriminate welcome to the Table subvert catechetical programs? That's a second worry of mine.

11 In that period of re-appreciation of Baptism that inspired us all a generation ago, the Roman Catholics developed a splendid *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, with supporting catechetical material. It stressed what might be called spiritual formation, rather than "book learnin'."

12 And among other churches, our own Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada developed a similar system of *Welcome to the Catechumenate*. Our current worship book, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, provides some magnificent resources, the full texts of which can be found in *ELW Leaders Edition*. It's terrific stuff.

13 But, to be fair, I heard a contrary opinion expressed a few years ago at a joint Anglican-Lutheran national worship conference, by one of the Anglican Church of Canada's premier liturgical theologians. Noting that the conference program included sessions on catechumenate resources, he said something like this: "I can't understand current enthusiasm for the catechumenate. It didn't work in the Fourth Century, and I don't see how we can expect it to work today..."

14 In any case, I'd agree that "Belonging comes before believing". And does it make a great deal of difference whether you come to Table by way of Font, or to Font by way of Table? These are questions our age, perhaps uniquely, must ponder.

15 I suppose that's evidence enough that the jury is still out on the effectiveness of the catechumenate programs that have enlivened the churches for the past generation. And justification enough for my posing the issue as a question.

16 Third: Does indiscriminate welcome to the Table compromise Christian discipleship?

17 The very act of standing and walking forward to the Table is a potent demonstration of Christian discipleship. That's another good reason not to distribute bread and cup to worshippers in their seats, but rather to expect worshippers to come forward to the Table to commune, each worshipper deliberately and intentionally signalling a commitment to Christian discipleship.

18 But the non-baptised – Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Zoroastrians, Unitarians, self-identified atheists, simple seekers, whoever – cannot be expected to know or to share that understanding of what it means to follow Christ, deliberately and intentionally.

19 "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes..." *1 Corinthians 11: 26*. Christian discipleship is a matter of life and death: When we take the bread and cup, we are demonstrating a willingness to follow Christ – to a cross, if need be.

20 That is heavy stuff. Worshippers should never approach the Table casually. Without thinking about it. Without that deliberate and intentional act of will that constitutes Christian discipleship.

21 Does Indiscriminate welcome to the Table compromise that intentionality? That discipline? Does it cheapen discipleship? I fear it does.

22 Still a final question, this one less controverted, in my opinion. Does indiscriminate welcome to the Table betray a mistrust of the liturgy itself?

23 It's not the first example of popular practice mistrusting the liturgy. It happens every time you hear a cheery "Good morning!" from the Presider, at the beginning of worship, followed by a laundry list of announcements, followed by a half-hearted, lackluster Apostolic Greeting – those stirring words "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ..." that constitute the liturgy's own Biblical "Good morning!" That's a prime example of mistrusting the liturgy. And sadly, you hear it all the time, in our churches.

24 Let the gracious words of the liturgy itself provide the only welcome you need. Then if anyone not baptized feels welcomed to the Table, by the liturgy's own beneficent promise, who will refuse them? Not I.

25 That coming forward to the Table is then their own decision, and should be honoured. I'd never turn anyone away from receiving bread or cup. Baptized or not.

26 So, what to do? Here's my advice:

27 A) Train worshippers in hospitality. Especially Greeters at the door, but not excluding people in the pew. Demonstrate to people in the pew how simple it is to guide strangers and visitors through the service unobtrusively. Point out page numbers if necessary. Whisper a comment, like "We stand for the Gospel reading out of respect..."

28 The sad reality is that in most of our parishes, “All are not welcome.” How about the handicapped, with steps and stairs outside the building and inside, including to an elevated chancel, where bread and cup are often received? How about the blind, the illiterate, and the functionally illiterate, when full participation in our worship requires reading paragraphs of prose? The hard of hearing, when worship leaders mumble and whisper, depending on a PA system to rescue them? Young people? Little kids? Out-of-the-closet gays? Worse yet, married gay couples?

29 Most parishes in my experience are terrible at truly inclusive welcome.

30 I say: Let the liturgy speak for itself. If it’s done right, with casual but winsome grace, with a heart-felt personal piety evident in worship leaders, it will never fail to speak to every heart.

31 Training in hospitality might even include proposing that you whisper an assurance to a visitor that it’s OK among us not to commune. And, if the visitor is your personal friend, for you yourself to “fast” from Communion as well, on that day, to show solidarity with your guest.

32 Part of our problem today is the wretched communion practice we’ve managed to develop, as relative new-comers to every-Sunday Communion: Ushers or Monitors who admit you, row-by-row, to the Table. Most regular worshipers among us are altogether unconscious of the terrible social pressures that ushers-at-communion represent. (“Everyone else in my row is getting up! Good grief! I’d better get up too!”).

33 B) Hence: Do not make *any* announcement, verbal or printed, about welcome *to the Table*. A generic welcome *to today’s worship* I suppose could be appropriate. I certainly would not recommend any announcement – verbal or printed – to the effect that “...only the baptized are welcome to commune...” That seems to me to be downright unwelcoming. Unfriendly. Off-putting.

34 C) Following A) above, do not fail to institute a vigorous program of mystagogic preaching and teaching in your parish. Include all of the above in your curriculum. Our people are woefully uninformed – even misinformed – for the most part, about worship: How to enter into Christian worship with both heart and mind thoroughly engaged.

35 D) And if un-baptized visitors return to the Table to commune, week after week? Then the pastoral leadership has a responsibility:

36 To take them aside, unobtrusively, and offer a program of catechetical formation in faith, to culminate in their Baptism. (Perhaps Catechumenate programs are a good idea, after all!); and,

37 To advise “fasting” from the bread and cup until after their Baptism. As the wonderful rites in the *ELW Leaders Edition* demonstrate, to become a catechumen is already, in a sense, to become part of the Body. Part of the Family.

38 Well, I’ve stirred the pot. Think about these things. Let’s talk.

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