L U T H E R A N

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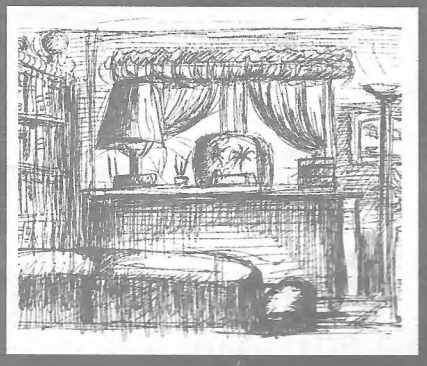

Partners in a Common Mission: Church and University

Second Coming or Last Hurrah?

To Counsel or Not to Counsel?

Over-Personalizing Communion?

Communion?

Are we turning the sacrament into a two-tiered experience?

H. Paul Santmire

As the whole church is considering its communion practices, one practice in particular, I believe, needs to be publicly identified and discussed, and probably dismissed, as soon as possible, hopefully by common consent.

I first encountered this practice many years ago in retreat settings, and found it deeply moving. The officiating pastor, in administering the bread and the wine, addresses you by your first name.

Not only did I find the practice personally meaningful, at first, I also judged it to be more than sound, theologically. If one can speak about the heart of Luther's theology, it was this, that the unmerited grace of Christ is given *for me* (*pro me*). Since Christ is *pro me*, why not call me by name when you offer his benefits to me?

The practice also appealed to me sociologically. Since ours, by most reckonings, is the age of the "lonely crowd," and the anonymous individual, in which people are known first and foremost by number (Social Security numbers and all the rest), and since ours is an age where many people feel like numbers, what could be better, for the gospel's sake, than addressing people by their first names when they are offered the bread and the wine during communion?

But then, as I witnessed the practice assuming more and more importance in congregations of the ELCA, I began to have second thoughts. Matters came into focus for me one Sunday in summer when I was on vacation. The officiating pastor called just about everyone at the table by name except my wife and me. Clearly, we were different, somehow.

The experience did not shock me, but I was troubled. As an expression of the universal fellowship of the faithful, that particular eucharistic rite was clearly more welcoming and inclusive of some of the faithful than others. Further, how would I have felt at that table had I been of a social class, an ethnicity, or an age that differed from the majority of the worshippers?

By that kind of personalizing of the sacrament, *are we not turning the sacrament into a two-tiered experience*? The in-group gets called by name, while "outsiders" or those whose names the officiating pastor might not have on the tip of his or her tongue, get something less personal.

Can the Body of Christ be so divided? Is the grace of communion somehow dependent on the personal relationship between the officiant and the communicant?

Potential Harm

These are critical issues. I therefore propose that, for the sake of the gospel across the church, we end this typically well-intended and ostensibly harmless practice. I am now inclined to think of it as potentially harmful. It represents an over-personalizing of the gospel. It is an artificial humanization that can diminish our encounter with the humanity of Christ which is richly there for us whether or not the officiant knows our names.

Unless we address these issues, I now believe we could easily end up in a situation of liturgical crisis not unlike the one addressed by St. Paul in Corinth. There it was a different kind of in-group that was the problem, more sociological (wealth) than personal (intimacy). But Paul minced no words, in any case. If you do not "discern the Body," he said, with reference to the *inclusion of all members of "the Body," the church, in the sacramental ritual in the same way*, you drink judgment on yourself.

The burden of proof, I now believe, must rest on the shoulders of any officiant who would regularly continue the practice of calling communicants by their first names.

H. Paul Santmire is senior pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Holy Trinity, Akron, Ohio.