

The Appropriateness and Value of Customs Associated with the Sacraments and Church Rites

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Fellow-shepherds,

This essay was assigned on a very wide subject. There is literally no end if one tries to evaluate and come to an agreement on all “customs”. This is particularly true of the trivia that has accumulated through the personalities of individuals in the centuries that the Church has used the Sacraments and the other rites with which we are so familiar.

However, since as it has been said with great truth, the pure Gospel practiced in human affairs seldom lasts beyond the memory of one man, and since each generation must re-establish and nail down the doctrines and practices associated thereto, it would seem entirely appropriate that some of the major customs be periodically held up to minute scrutiny and that the whole area of this type adiaphoric tradition be accorded thorough fenestration.

The praesidium accorded the essayist a certain latitude in the preparation of this work. The many brethren to whom we spoke concerning the title of the essay crystalized our opinion that we are actually truly concerned with a very few customs.

Specifically, therefore, we shall direct our guns toward the following subjects: Sponsorship at baptism; Confirmation; Registration at the Lord’s Table. We have chosen to speak on these matters in that order because that is chronologically the order in which we normally associate them.

Since, as we heard stated from this very rostrum some years ago, “Originality is nothing else than undetected plagiarism”, we shall only generally acknowledge our heavy leaning on contemporary writings, within our own Synod and also without.

I. SPONSORSHIP

At the outset, let it be stated that, after research on the subject that concerns customs associated with the Sacrament of Holy Baptism and their appropriateness and value, the opinion of this essayist could be boiled down to this: Gods Word requires that all Christians are to be baptized, in witness whereof we adduce Matthew 28:19, which is familiar indeed to all of you stating “. . . . Baptizing them in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost”. As far as we can determine from a study of the Scriptures in this matter, the only thing demanded in them by the Son of God is the application of water in the Name of the Trinity for the remission of sin, signifying the drowning of our old Adam with the emergence of the new man who should daily come forth in contrition and repentance to the leading of a Christian, godly life. All else, then, which is normally associated with the administration of the Sacrament of Baptism in our midst, or in the Christian Church at large, must properly be said to fall within the sphere of custom. It is not hard to find this same thought expressed in one form or another by the older theologians.

For instance, Brent says, “Baptism may be defined as a sacred action, instituted by Christ, by which men are washed with water, in the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and are thus regenerated and renewed, that they may secure eternal life.” In the Smalcald Articles, we find “Baptism is nothing else than the Word of God with washing in water, according to His institution and command”; or, as Paul says in Ephesians 5: 26, “The washing of water by the Word.” Hollatz also said: “Baptism is the sacred solemn action by which sinful men are washed in water in the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost”.

To this act, as described heretofore, there has been appended a series of ceremonies and usages more or less important, all of which are, however, not essential to baptism, but are intended only to render the act more solemn. Hence our statement that everything else connected with the administration of the Sacrament can legitimately be classified as “custom”.

Now, since we cannot point to specific words of Scripture for any specific actions in connection with the administration of baptism, it would follow that these customs may all be re-evaluated periodically in the light of how appropriate they yet are and what value they effect in their intended function. Gerhardt specifies these following usages as customary in our churches (and indeed they are found in the Baptismal service in our agenda): 1. The admonition concerning original sin. This would seem to have its origin in the fact that John the Baptist admonished those coming to his baptism of the fruitlessness of their lives. (cf. Matthew 3:10). 2. The giving of the name. This can only be traced back to the name-giving associated with the act of circumcision. (cf. Luke 1:59). 3. The minor exorcism. Here would belong the formula in the ancient Church, which is not, however, too customary among us any more, namely: “I adjure thee, thou unclean spirit, that Thou come out of this servant of Jesus Christ, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.” Here also belongs the renunciation of Satan, by which those who are to be baptized solemnly and in express words, renounce Satan and all his pomp, all his works and all his ways. 4. The sign of the cross. This is to specify that the infant’s reception into grace occurs only by the merit of Christ the crucified. 5. The prayers. These are spoken from the heart after the example of our Lord Himself. (cf. Matthew 19:14, and Mark 10:14). 6. The recitation of the Gospel. 7. The imposition of hands. 8. The recitation of the Lord’s Prayer. 9. The use of sponsors. Now let’s take a look at a baptism being administered.

It is dark. A shivering band of people is gathered near a cistern down under the earth to avoid detection by those who would persecute them. Most of the band are quiet, though a few whisper. Someone in the group sees a total stranger. A little frightened, he makes hasty inquiry. Another whispers back to him, “I will stand behind this one. He would indeed be a Christian. Fear not, he will not betray us.” Now a leader comes to the front, whispering some words in the almost eerie setting. Some of the people begin to take off their outer garments, folding them and setting them aside. With great solemnity and in many cases a lot of fear they approach the cistern where the water bubbles and flows. The children are put forward and dipped in first, after some questions which in many cases are answered for them. Then come the older children and the men. They are asked a number of very serious questions. After answering, and being placed under the water, they come out struck dumb by an experience of both physical and spiritual shock. Finally the women remove their ornaments and loosen their hair. Warily they step into the water and come out again, dressing in the now brightening glow of torches and candles.

The leader is very busy, asking questions and hearing answers and repeating formulas. He seems satisfied with the proceedings, and gives orders for an exit to be prepared. The group makes its way through some passageways and into a larger chamber where others, who have themselves undergone this experience on an earlier occasion, greet them warmly. They then invite them to a meal of bread and wine where sacred words are spoken and hymns are sung. The people now seem relieved and are obviously happy. They have been baptized. The event -- with all the hazards of the mystic and the over-dramatic -- has been described here more or less after the manner of the “*traditio apostolica*”, the Apostolic tradition of Hippolytus in the earliest Christian centuries.

It is light. A group of people are gathered off to the side in front of a large room full of onlookers. The sun is streaming in through a colorful window. A man wearing long black clothes beckons a smaller gathering of people over to a sort of finger-bowl on a marble stand. They are somewhat ill at ease but generally undisturbed by the whole procedure. Competing with the roar of power mowers, a soothing ripple of sounds emanates from an electronic organ. It seems that silence is abhorred by the gathered people. The man in the long clothes begins to read.

One of the people up front is carrying a healthy looking baby who through careful over-feeding has been induced into somnolence. Nothing the baby does should be allowed to disturb the manners of this impressive setting. He has a little blue suit with pink lambs embroidered on it. Mother has put a pretty curl in his hair and

hopes the man in the long robe will not mess it up too much, while she passively wonders whether the dinner for her guests will be ruined. Father is also watching the proceedings, sometimes with an envelope in his pocket. He is happy too, he was able to arrange a Sunday when he could have some of his friends over for a few toasts. He hopes to get out of the building after while without becoming too involved in conversation with the man in the long clothes, who might ask him some embarrassing questions.

The “godparents,” meanwhile, are smiling down at the baby; he looks so “cute” lying there smiling while the man describes a cross on his forehead and breast. They chuckle a little when the baby burps from his over-feeding, interrupting the man in the long clothes. They were glad they talked the parents into “having it done”. The man dips his fingers into a little bowl three times and says some words: They hear a prayer. The godmother turns and walks back down the aisle, very conscious of how the child’s light blue suit matches her own new dress. The other people smile, pleased at how things have gone. The baby was just precious. He has been baptized, with sponsors and everything.

This event has been described more or less after the manner of the “*traditio protestantica*”, the Protestant tradition of the 20th century.

Now in both cases the people involved were truly baptized, were they not? In both cases that I described rather freely, someone spoke for someone else. These are what we call the Sponsors. Where did they come from? Sponsors were not used at first, neither are they required by God’s Word. As far as I can determine, the custom of having sponsors originated in the post-Apostolic Church during the time of the persecutions and was used primarily for adults. Historians record that some of the bitterest enemies of Christianity tried to get into the Church as spies and ascertain the identity of the Christians that they might haul them before the authorities. These people acted as regular fifth columnists, even submitting to catechism instructions and baptism for their nefarious purposes. In order to prevent such spies from sneaking into the membership of the Church, it became required that a known Christian speak for, or sponsor, the applicant, and vouch for his sincere intentions of becoming a Christian. The Sponsor was expected further to see that his “ward” studied the Catechism, attended the worship and in general grew in grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Sponsor was also expected to encourage his ward to remain steadfast in his faith and to lead a godly life.

Many years after the sponsorship had been introduced for adult baptisms, it was also adapted to the baptism of infants. Christian parents realized that because of persecutions they were liable to die a martyr’s death any day. They wanted the assurance that, should their children become orphaned, they would yet be properly provided for. This they desired especially in respect to their children being reared in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. And so, when they sought sponsors, or godparents, they sought those who would solemnly promise to assume the responsibility of rearing their children both physically and spiritually. And naturally, they chose the most devout and reliable Christians.

The custom of sponsorship for children has remained with us, while we no longer customarily practice the same system for adults. Choosing sponsors for our children is a solemn, and at times a difficult matter. The Church, ostensibly at least, requires that those who are to serve as sponsors be members of a Lutheran Church that is in fellowship with us. But in view of the fact that ours is such a mobile society, and that very often the children settle thousands of miles away from their parents or their relatives with whom they grew up and with whom they are one in faith, it becomes almost impossible for a young couple, who have just settled in a city, to find some friend or relative who is of the same faith. But there is another man down at the office, or a neighbor that they could ask, who is not of the same specific fellowship. Or, in the case of newly confirmed adult converts, who then bring their children to be baptized. They have no friends or relatives who are yet of the same faith. They don’t want to act contrary to the practice of their newly-found church, but they don’t want to needlessly hurt the feelings of their dear friends or relatives either. It is difficult.

But still, if we are going to have sponsors, then the same principle that obtained at the beginning of their use, must also obtain in modern times, viz: that the chief thing required is the rearing of their godchildren in the true fear of the Lord. In our time the danger of dying a martyr’s death does not seem imminent, but a sudden death for young fathers and mothers from other causes in our speeded-up society is not unusual. A look at our traffic tolls on our highways will bear this out, (almost 16,000 persons killed by the end of May, 1964). State

welfare agencies will no longer permit indigent children to suffer lack of clothing or food or shelter. Therefore, Christian parents don't have to be so much concerned about that as about their children's spiritual well-being. The main duty then to which a sponsor obligates himself is that of, in a secondary sense while the parents are living, rearing these children in the true and saving faith as we ourselves have been taught, believe, and confess. It would appear, therefore, that secondary parenthood in this sense is still something to be desired. This brings us to the salient point. Do sponsors in their function at the baptismal font confess their own faith, or are they confessing the faith of the child, which must also be the faith of the administering church to which the parents belong?

The role of sponsor is, therefore, a very important one. No one can affirm that sponsors at the baptism of infants is wrong. Rather, we will all agree that it is indeed a God-pleasing custom of the church to take care and precaution for the future Christian training of the lambs whom Christ has given us. If we are to retain the custom of sponsorship, then we must by thorough indoctrination let it be crystal clear to all of our people that to ask someone who is not completely one with us in faith and practice to act as sponsor for our children is unthinkable, nay, it becomes a monstrosity. If we knowingly and deliberately allow someone, who otherwise expresses his or her faith differently than is in accord with Scripture, to function as a sponsor at our services, we become guilty of unionism.

Somehow the thought seems to have arisen that this is a problem peculiar to our day and age. Actually the matter of heterodox sponsors is very old. I do say that it has been, perhaps, greatly aggravated in recent years because of the compromising attitude of so many nominally Lutheran churches. But from Walther's *Pastorale*, it would seem that even in his time the problem was there, And what did Walther do and advocate? He writes in 1872: "Zwar hat der Prediger darauf hinzuwirken, dasz nur rechtschaffene Lutheraner dazu (Patenamt) erwählt werden, and damit dies geschehe, seine Gemeinde daran zu gewöhnen, dasz ihm die zu vollziehene Taufe vor Einladung der Gewatern gemeldet werde; jedoch, sind wohlgesinnte Andersglaeubige bereits eingeladen oder treten sie schon an den Taufstein, so soll sie der Prediger nicht abweisen, ihnen so eine oeffentliche Beschaemung bereiten and ihnen dadurch einen dauernden Widerwillen gegen unsere Kirche and unserer Ministerium erwecken. Denn so unrecht es ist, dasz Lutheraner eine Patenstelle in irrglaeubigen Kirchen uebernehmen and somit am Gottesdienst der Falschglaeubigen Theil nehmen, so wenig ist es gewissensverletzend, wohlgesinnten Andersglaeubigen in dem bezeichneten Falls zu erlauben, dasz sie Zeugen fuer unsere rechtmoeszig vollzogene Taufe sein".

A free translation would be something like this: "The Pastor should indeed work toward encouraging his parishioners to select only true Lutherans to serve as sponsors for their children. And in order that this should be done he should train his congregation to announce the approaching baptism to him before the sponsor has been invited to serve. Yet, if well-meaning sponsors of another faith have been invited or are already at the baptismal font, he should not turn them back and cause them to be openly embarrassed and bring about an unending resentment toward our Church and its ministry. For as it is wrong for Lutherans to serve as sponsors in erring churches and thereby take part in a service of erring churches, so little is it a violation of conscience to permit well-meaning Christians of a different faith in such a case to serve as witnesses to our true baptism."

From this it would seem that Walther, nearly 100 years ago, considered it expedient to make an exception to the general rule at times. But we who have been in the ministry for some time quickly realize how swiftly the exceptions become the rule. No, if we are to keep our system of sponsorship, then we would have to keep it clean. The sponsors represent the church into whose membership the baptized is received. By receiving the baptized into its membership the church pledges itself to participate in and provide for the Christian education of the baptized, in keeping with our Lord's Word to "feed My lambs". How could anyone represent a church denomination of which he is not a member? Then too, sponsors also promise to pray for the baptized. Can anyone pray sincerely for another to remain strong and grow in a faith if he himself is not of that faith?

But, you say, you still have not answered the questions that trouble most of us. How tightly should we draw the lines regarding who may or may not serve as sponsor? Can we accept as sponsors people from, let us say, the Confessional Lutheran Church? Or how about ourself acting as a sponsor for a child in the Synod of Missouri? Is there really unanimity of practice among us? Is the office of sponsor becoming pretty much an empty form and thus a contributing factor to the increase in formalism in religion today? Are we acting right when we permit parents to postpone indefinitely the baptism of their child until the proper sponsor can conveniently come to the church for the baptism from, let us say, greater distances? Do any of us really feel proud of our rigid and upright “stand” when a child is lost to baptism in the true Lutheran Church, because we will not accept “sponsors” that have been picked out by people and who are not members of the church? This happens most often, in our experience, with children from families whom we are trying, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to bring into the kingdom of Christ, but who as yet have no understanding of the principles involved in the position we are forced to take.

We assumed when this topic was assigned that the brethren generally are increasingly searching for some sort of change. First we had to ask the question, “May we rightly change such a thing as our present system of sponsorship?” In answer we repeat that it is of human origin, neither commanded nor forbidden by God in His Word. And as far as the older theologians are concerned, Article X of the Formula of Concord states: “We believe that the congregation of God of every place and of every time has the good right and authority to change, diminish, or increase them, without thoughtlessness, and offense, in an orderly way, as at any time it may be regarded most profitable, most beneficial, and best for good order, maintaining Christian discipline, and the edification of the Church.” Gerhardt wrote: “In the customs neither commanded nor forbidden. by God, the liberty must be guarded which Christ has purchased and conferred on His church namely, by observing them freely, without the notion that they are necessary. They may be abrogated or altered . . . if they cease to be of benefit, do not achieve their salutary purpose, are misused, or degenerate into a superstition.”

What are the solutions then? I am going to quote very briefly from a little booklet that has just come into print in our own Synod, authorized by the Minnesota District.

The first suggested solution is one well-known and, no doubt, used often by many of you. It is the use of witnesses in the case of heterodox people chosen by parents of a child to be baptized. While God’s Word does not require sponsors, the Church does require the presence of witnesses, that such witnesses can attest the baptism, should it become necessary to do so. And certainly this requirement is in full agreement with the spirit of Matthew 18:16b: “. . . in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established,” and in 1 Corinthians 14:40: “Let all things be done decently and in order”. In fact, in our Lutheran agenda we have a special witness form for such baptisms. In the witness form of baptism the entire congregation confesses the Christian faith into which the child is baptized and the entire congregation assumes the responsibility for the God-pleasing rearing of the baptized.

A second suggestion would be this: Let Christian parents have relatives who are not of the same faith or fellowship serve as witnesses, but also request one or two trusted members of the congregation, even the duly elected Elders, to serve as sponsors. We believe there is much to commend this. Consciences are not violated, the truth is not compromised, and parents are not deprived of the assurance that reliable, trusted, and qualified individuals will personally oversee the rearing of their children in the true faith, should they become orphaned.

There is yet a third suggestion. In this one I shall quote directly from the source that I mentioned just a few minutes ago, since I agree with it in principle. “. . . the elimination of sponsors in the usual sense of the term.

“In this arrangement the parents themselves must come with their child to the baptismal font and dedicate it to the Lord. This arrangement is not as radical as it may seem to us at first. It was the accepted practice in the Church for a long time many centuries ago.

“Furthermore, we find several examples of something of a somewhat similar nature in both the old and the New Testaments. Hannah personally brought her young child, Samuel, to the Lord at Shiloh to ‘lend him to the Lord.’ 1 Samuel 1:28. Mary and Joseph, according to the Law, brought the young child, Jesus, to the

Temple to 'present Him to the Lord.' Luke 2:22. It was the parents who brought the 'young children to Jesus that He should touch them.' Mark 10:13.

"Thus, when parents present themselves with their child before God, they give expression to their true desire to dedicate their child to God and His service.

"By this arrangement the parents' solemn obligation to train their child to God's true fear and love is emphasized. And how impressive it is when Christian parents at the baptism of their child promise before God in His sanctuary to carry out their foremost obligation,

"Two officers of the Church might appear with the parents to show that the church also is an intensely interested participant in the baptism of the child. Their presence at the baptism assures the parents that the church, on its part, pledges itself to provide the facilities, teachers, and tools needed for the spiritual growth and well-being of her baptized children.

"Doesn't this careful approach to a custom associated with baptism conform more closely to the solemn importance of baptism itself? The Scriptures state that baptism is a gracious water of life and a washing of regeneration in the Holy Ghost, which God shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ, our Savior, that being justified by His grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life." This ends our quote from the Minnesota authorized statement.

Before we too quickly discard this last suggestion, may we add that it has much to commend it, since, apparently, the present system of sponsorship has to a great extent lost its meaning and purpose. If it had not, then I must ask why throughout our whole Synod in this past biennium has so much emphasis been laid on this subject? There are at least three districts beside our own which have raised the same subject and have had essays prepared. In our very fluid and rapidly shifting population, how many sponsors are still able to keep a close personal contact with the children on whose behalf they have spoken? As one brother in our midst wrote to me, "Other than praying for the child, how can sponsors in New York assume spiritual obligation for children in California? The praying they should do without being sponsors."

Let this rather lengthy and perhaps many-pronged dissertation serve not as a final word on this matter, but rather let it serve as a stimulus and an incentive for the whole body to give this increasingly vexing problem some real concern and thought, and arrive in the near future at a God-pleasing, practical, and salutary solution.

II. CONFIRMATION.

Now, as stated in the introduction, we are going to speak briefly on the subject of Confirmation, not, however, particularly emphasizing the individual customs we have associated with it. We are not, for instance, going to speak of what age children should attain, nor which calendar date is most appropriate, or what type certificate ought to be used, etc. But, since confirmation itself can be termed in the broadest sense a custom in the Church, we are going to use it as a bridge between Baptism and the Lord's Supper in this Essay. In our researching of this subject, we found it to be intensely interesting and more than a little eye-opening. We would suggest that the matter of confirmation as it is practiced among us be the subject for another thorough study to be presented at some future convention.

Lutheran confirmation is not a continuation of confirmation as practiced in the early church, nor as it is found later in the Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches. Out of the tangled mass of influences and counter-influences in the post-reformation years, one may discern no less than six different major types of confirmation within the Lutheran church. For want of better terms these may be called Catechetical, Hierarchical, Sacramental, Traditional, Pietistic, and Rationalistic. The Catechetical form was most common where Luther's pupils were most influential. It arose from the need to prepare Christians for the Lord's Supper. It was not necessarily limited to those contemplating first communion. Because the average communicant was so thoroughly instructed, he was to become in effect a catechumen each time he went to communion. The Goslar Church Order, 1531, prescribed that persons indicating their intention to partake of the Lord's Supper be examined in the Ten Commandments, the Lords Prayer, and the words of Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Each was to confess his faith, be questioned as to what he desired to received in Holy Communion, and be

examined in respect to his Christian life. While we cannot in fact document it, we feel that prescriptions such as these in the early Reformation Church may well form one of the more basic reasons for the beginning of the custom concerning which we speak later, namely announcement or registration.

With few exceptions, confirmation in the Lutheran Church has been structured on the means of grace. It is suspended between the sacramental poles of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Confirmation is part of the nurturing of that faith which the Holy Spirit created in Holy Baptism. Through instruction the church discloses to the catechumen the meaning and continued significance of the Sacraments. Furthermore, confirmation prepares the child for joyful and reverent participation in the Lord's Supper and richer sharing of all that life in the Body of Christ implies. Such nurture and preparation is performed through instruction by the Word, the power of life to life.

When the Christian Church, in obedience to the Lord's command, baptizes a child, it is privileged to perform a stupendous miracle in His Name. In Holy Baptism, God seizes the sinner and makes him His own. In this act, the sin, together with the old Adam, dies an instant death. God creates in the infant the miracle of faith, which clothes him in Christ's righteousness and gives him the new life. God says in effect, "You are My child, My own, through the merits of My Son."

In Holy Baptism, God makes a covenant with the infant. It is a unique covenant. Most covenants are bilateral, that is, one party agrees to something to which a second party makes a corresponding and conditionally reciprocating promise. The Baptismal covenant is unilateral. By nature we are not in a position to drive any kind of bargain with God. But God comes to man in his sin and with baptism makes him an enduring promise of forgiveness, life, and salvation. Man merely accepts. Even this acceptance is the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit. God never breaks the covenant. Man may, but God does not. The covenant never ceases and needs no renewal. As Luther said, "Therefore Baptism remains forever. Even though we fall from it and sin, nevertheless we always have access to it so that we may again subdue the old man." In the light of this, it becomes very difficult for us in confirmation to speak of it as a "renewal" of the Baptism covenant.

Actually, at Confirmation the young Christian gives merely his personal affirmation of the covenant which God made toward him at the time of his Baptism and so re-affirms that he will live in that covenant. This affirmation is to be part of his continuous concern. Until he dies the Christian undertakes through Word and Sacraments to remain true to the Baptismal covenant and in faith to mortify his flesh.

Preparation for the Lord's Supper has been historically one of the major roles of Confirmation, and as such this Sacrament is the second sacramental pole. Confirmation is to help meet the responsibility of both the parents and the church for the instruction implied in Baptism and for the Communion preparation required in 1 Corinthians 11:23-30. However, Confirmation does not necessarily give the catechumen the right to partake of the Lord's Supper. That right flows out of Baptism; when he becomes God's own child. It is a right given to him because he is a child of God through Jesus' blood and righteousness. Through confirmation the church acknowledges that the catechumen is ready to exercise his right because he is now able to prepare himself for the Lord's Supper. Confirmation indicates only that the confirmed person has shown that he is able to discern the Lord's body, and, as far as the congregation can determine, is spiritually fit to receive the gift of the Lord's Supper, and in keeping with the injunction of St. Paul, has that awareness that he is able to examine himself prior to partaking. This is in harmony with the Augsburg Confession, which says, "It is not customary to administer the body of Christ except to those who have previously been examined and absolved." (AC Art. XXV, 1).

It would seem to us, therefore, that the essential elements of confirmation would be 3, viz: the instruction in the Word, the Confession of faith, and the intercession of the congregation.

To conclude this short dissertation, we would say that the objectives for confirmation instruction, then, are for every confirmand, as a baptized child of God and as a member of the Body of Christ, to possess a more developed personal faith life in response to the means of grace, so that as a maturing Christian he 1. More fully live the life in Christ and 2. Be able to participate in the Sacrament of Holy Communion worthily.

III. REGISTRATION FOR COMMUNION.

Since a worthy communing is to be a continuing and growing thing in the life of a Christian, and since we extend so much effort through educational agencies and confirmation instruction to help, under the working of the Holy Spirit, those committed to our care to come to the realization of the afore-stated purposes, how can we best effect a continuance thereof, particularly in the matter of the Lord's Supper?

First of all, of course, by pursuing the path of potent preaching and pristine practicing of God's glistening Gospel of grace through which the Holy Spirit does operate in human hearts to their growth in grace and knowledge. And certainly the conscientious application of a custom among us known as registration or announcement for Holy Communion can only be adjudged as most salutary to the afore-stated purposes.

First of all, it should be stated that registration is a custom. Literally speaking we cannot find it to be specifically commanded in the Holy Scriptures. Certainly, however, we must concede that this custom indeed has its roots in Scriptural admonition as regards the administration of the Sacrament of the Altar, namely in the injunctions with which you are all familiar; to quote, "Let a man examine himself and so let him eat of that bread, and etc.", and where St. Paul speaks of "eating and drinking unworthily, not discerning the Lord's body".

The purpose of the Gospel is not only to sustain faith, but, first of all, to work faith in the hearts of sinners. The Sacrament of the Altar, on the other hand, is not given in order to regenerate a man, but for the firming of his faith and the comforting of the contrite. The mere act of eating and drinking will effect nothing. It is only repentant faith that can grasp the treasure that the Lord so richly provides in this institution. Hence the communicant must have first of all a knowledge of the Gospel, not only in his head but treasured in his heart, and also a comprehension of what the Sacrament is and what it is intended to do by our Lord. We must be aware of the fact that God's promise and Word are first in importance because of the blessing they convey, of which the body and blood of our Lord is an additional pledge and surety. Luther taught this. In his treatise on "The Adoration of the Sacrament" written near the end of April in 1523, he stated, "In the first place, we have often said that the chief and foremost thing in the Sacrament is the Word of Christ, when He says: 'Take and eat, this is My body which is given for you.' Likewise also, when He took the cup and He said: 'Take and drink of it, all of you, this is the cup of a New Testament in My blood which is shed for you for the forgiveness of sin. As often as you do this do it in remembrance of Me.'

"Everything depends on these words. Every Christian should and must know them and hold them fast. He must never let anyone take them away from him by any other kind of teaching, even though it were an angel from heaven (Galatians 1, 8) . . . Language cannot express how great and mighty these words are, for they are the sun and substance of the whole Gospel. This is why these words are far more important than the Sacrament itself, and a Christian should make it a practice to give far more attention to these words than to the Sacrament." Again, in the same treatise he said, "It is highly important to lead the people back from the Sacrament to the Word, and to accustom them to pay much more attention to the words than to the Sacrament . . ." (Luther's works, Vol. 36, page 277).

But how can we as shepherds assist our flocks in this? Why, by expending every effort toward keeping them quickened in faith and life also in participation in the Holy Supper. Still the best and most effective way because of its intimacy and individuality is the custom of registration. It has so much to commend it that we feel it would approach the criminal to emasculate it any further or let it deteriorate any more than it has. In case you no longer recall vividly what we learned in our studies and should have learned with each passing year of our pastoral practice, listen to what old Fritz has to say in his *Pastorale*: "Since the minister of the Gospel is not only teacher, but also shepherd (pastor), bishop, watchman, Ephesians 4:11; 1 Timothy 3:1; Hebrews 13:17; not only the dispenser of the Holy Sacrament but also a steward of such, 1 Corinthians 4:1, and because of the confessional character of the Lords Supper, it is his solemn duty to insist that those who would receive the Sacrament of the Altar previously register their names with him and give him an opportunity to speak to them. The pastor ought conscientiously and tactfully to use this opportunity as the spiritual need of those desiring to receive the Sacrament may demand."

Then he goes on, "Registration for communion is necessary—the Sacrament should not be administered to all persons, but only to Christians; Matt. 26:26 (disciples); not to all Christians, however, but only to such as

can examine themselves, are penitent, and orthodox (Abendmahlsgemeinschaft ist Kirchengemeinschaft) 1 Cor. 11:28, 29.” For this statement he adduces the declaration of Chrysostom: “I would rather let my own body be destroyed than permit that the body of the Lord be given to an unworthy person; I would rather let my own blood be shed than permit that the most holy blood of the Lord be given to an unworthy person (Hom. 83 in Matthew).” Again, as we have previously quoted, in the 25th article of the Augsburg Confession it says: “It is not usual to give the body of the Lord except to them that have been previously examined and absolved”.

Fritz’s second major reason for the custom of registration is what he calls the “exploratio”, or the examination. He writes: “Since private confession is no longer a common practice in our church, it is necessary that the pastor take occasion to speak to his parishioners when they register for Communion. He should therefore designate a certain place (where the necessary privacy is assured), a certain day, and a certain time when he personally will receive such as intend to commune on the following Sunday. A conscientious pastor will not permit members of his family or his secretary to receive the announcement for Communion or direct his people to register by merely writing their name on a pad lying on a table, or handing him their name on a slip of paper.”

It goes without saying that the purpose of the “exploratio” should be the spiritual welfare of those who commune. The pastor ought to make sure that a communicant 1. believes that the Bible is the inspired Word of God; 2. believes the doctrines essential to salvation; 3. confesses that he is a sinner, trusts solely in the merits of Christ, is not living in any sin, e.g. at enmity with any person; 4. believes the Real Presence and the Lord’s promise of forgiveness and seeks the strengthening of his faith and true godliness; 5. believes and confesses the Lutheran doctrine according to Luther’s small catechism and is assured that the Lutheran Church is the true orthodox church.”

I doubt whether there are any among us who take serious exception to the high principle and salutary procedure outlined here by the good doctor. How is it then that we hear the cry that registration among us has deteriorated to the point where we should re-evaluate it and perhaps change it? Can we blame our society for this deterioration? Is this apparent trend among us something we can lay at our peoples feet, as we are, with some justification, able to do in the matter of sponsorship? Or is it that our own prior instruction in the matter of announcement and preparation for Communion has not been strong enough? Is it perhaps that in the increased administrative press of a modern ministry we no longer are able to make the personal follow-up that a strict adherence to the principles of registration demands?

While registration is indeed a custom, this writer at the dictates of his own conscience, was compelled to list no less than 6 reasons why we should intensify our efforts to keep this custom on a higher plane. For your discussion they are: 1. It helps direct the mind and thinking of the announced communicant toward the Sacrament itself; 2. A prior time for announcement will afford ample time for the Scripturally required self-examination of the communicant; 3. It affords an opportunity for private confession for the communicant. This takes on greater importance when one again remembers the great demands on the time of the pastor; when it becomes virtually impossible to set up an individual appointment for days at a time; 4. It gives the pastor the time and the place that he, as the shepherd, may reprove, exhort, rebuke, comfort, encourage, or commend. Please do not underestimate the value of this time; 5. It is an invaluable aid in helping to maintain the Scripturally correct practice of a “close communion”; 6. While relatively unimportant, it also helps the pastor determine for how many communicants he must prepare the elements.

Now, may we comment briefly on some of these points? On point number 1, we would say this. The cry of being busy, busy, busy, is not restricted solely to the ministry. An accelerated society has placed more demands than ever upon the average person, both as to work, and social commitment, as well as family responsibilities. Is there, however, any excuse for a member of a Christian congregation to walk into the door of a church on a Sunday morning, see the altar prepared for Communion, and for the first time say to himself, “Oh my, today’s Communion. I guess I had better go.” What possibility is there for such a person to truly examine himself, and at the same time take part in the worship that precedes the celebration?

Reason number 2 is somewhat related to number 1. By setting a time of registration well in advance of the intended observance of the Holy Supper, no Christian will be able in good conscience to plead that he has

not had the time to go apart from the world, and examine himself according to his station in life and the Ten Commandments.

Item 3 spoke of opportunity for private confession. Again the common cry is heard that we don't use this privilege as often as we might. To which we have to ask, "Why don't we? Don't we sin as much as our forefathers did? Or is it because Christ's disciples are not encouraged or made fully cognizant of the blessing that can derive here-from?" While it is true, as one brother stated to me, that the Scripture says nothing of someone else examining or "exploring" the people who are about to partake of Communion, nevertheless it has been done since the days of the reformation. In fact, according to the Stralsund Church Order of 1555 the confirmands participated, as did all communicants, in private confession before partaking of the Sacrament.

Number 4. The pastor can reprove or exhort, etc.,... (referring to the five points quoted from Fritz's *Pastorale* as to what the pastor should make sure that a communicant knows and believes); when is the better time to do this, than just prior to the participation in the wonder of receiving Christ's body and blood. Now this does not mean that everyone coming to the Sacrament must be asked all these questions, or even every time that he registers. Here Luther said: "I judge that it is sufficient that he who desires to receive the Sacrament be thus examined once a year; in fact such a one may be so well instructed that he needs to be thus examined once in a lifetime or not at all; for our only purpose is to avoid that both worthy and unworthy persons come to the Lord's Table".

The last reason for keeping registration upon which we comment is number 5, i.e. to help keep our Scripturally correct practice of "close communion". There is not a pastor among us who does not hold in essence with the Galesburg rule. Briefly it is this, adopted at Galesburg, Illinois in 1875 by the General Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in North America: "The rule, which accords with the Word of God and with the confession of our Church is: 'Lutheran pulpits for Lutheran ministers only; Lutheran altars for Lutheran communicants only.'" Is not the practice of registration, properly pursued, a most effective discipline to the maintaining of this Scriptural principle? Or, should it become the pastors unpleasant duty to suspend someone from the participation at the Lords Table because of gross and open sin or offense, when is a better time to do this and encourage such a person to return to the fold in repentance and faith than in the framework of preparation for the reception of this visible means of grace?

Now let this suffice as to a presentation of both the appropriateness and value of the custom of registration as it presently obtains in our midst.

May we, however, in closing offer a few suggestions. Let the word registration or announcement for Communion, through continued reference and informative lecture, become synonymous in the minds of our people with the Scripturally required self-examination prior to partaking of the Holy Supper. Let these words also become synonymous with the concept that at this time (i.e. time for announcement) each individual in the congregation will have an opportunity to speak to his pastor face to face and to practice the very salutary privilege of private confession. Brethren, we may be surprised at how many of the sheep will thus come to their shepherd with the things that bother them deeply, but which they hesitate to bring to him because "he is so busy" with the myriad other functions and duties that our present society deems concomitant to his real calling.

Certainly the ideal situation would yet be where the individuals in the congregation would personally make their announcement to the pastor in his office, or some appropriate setting designated by him. However, we should be realists enough to acknowledge the fact that this will perhaps never happen again during our lifetime. So we ask, "Can we maintain a proper system of registration by condoning the practice of telephoning the announcements to the church office?" Yes, we feel that the telephone can be used most profitably here. It is still a direct voice to ear contact between pastor and his people. While the pastor will not, ordinarily, discuss matters of personal or spiritual gravity over the telephone, he will certainly be able to ascertain the necessity for such conversation, and immediately establish a time and place to pursue a further and deeper period of counseling. So the practice of telephoning announcements, while not to be particularly encouraged, should neither be specifically discouraged.

What about the practice of "communion cards" which are signed and placed in the offering plate or handed to an usher on the previous Sunday or Sundays? Can these be used profitably to effect the same ends as

we have attempted to outline here? Again we say “Yes, but to a limited degree”. When one considers that the pastor ordinarily receives these cards the Sunday preceding the observance of the Lords Supper, one does also concede that both he and his people have an entire week—a whole week in which the pastor may certainly seek out and counsel those whom he feels are in need of his admonition, comfort, or encouragement. Likewise, the Christian who has announced by card should be made aware of the fact that he too will have the entire week in which to avail himself of the privileges open to him in private confession, or just plain “talking” to his pastor about matters pertaining to his spiritual life. Oh surely, there is also a danger here, namely there will always be those who sign a card on one Sunday and simply do not honor their commitment to God when the time for the observance of the Sacrament arrives. But is this danger any greater with the card or the telephone call than it is with the personal appearance, truly any greater? Will not the pastor have the same obligation in all such cases, to immediately seek out all such and ascertain the reasons for their abstention. Will he not, if necessary, reprove all who break their self-made appointment at the Lords Table regardless of how that appointment has been made?

One last thought seems to be in order, in answer to the fears expressed by others of the brethren: This is the peril that increased enforcement and insistence upon registration will augment a wrong port of “Priesterherschaft” or dictatorship. It should not, for any pastor who truly holds his Call to be sacred as indeed he must, will never lose sight (by the grace of God) of the fact that the word “Minister” means “servant”. If anything, he should recall at all times the promise of our Savior when He said: “He that would be great among you, let him be your servant”. What shall we do, however, in the case of those who come to the church office three minutes before the worship begins and announce for communion? It has been our practice to immediately question such person as to whether he has truly had time to examine himself and thus prepare worthily in repentance and faith to receive the Holy Supper to his soul’s health. A result of this that can be demonstrated is the fact that communion attendance has not decreased, but over the years the incidence of conscientious announcement has increased in our individual experience.

A closing thrust—a periodic sermon will always be of value in holding high in our people’s hearts and minds the eternal blessings that will accrue through the period of a Christian’s lifetime by God’s grace in Christ Jesus as the result of conscientious, sincere, earnest, and frequent preparation and reception of the Lord’s Supper. Or even a special, brief lecture a few times a year in connection with the regular Sunday morning worship explaining the value and validity of the church’s insistence upon registration for Communion will effect startling results, if only by reason of the unusual nature of such a lecture. In general conclusion:

Any custom in the Christian Church, the sincere practice of which necessitates that the participant determine the purpose, meaning, and value of the act in which he is sharing, cannot be said to be entirely without spiritual worth or redundant. Obviously this must hold true of the subjects treated in this work, to wit: Sponsorship at Baptism, Confirmation of children, and registration at Communion.

May it please God—let each of us be pointedly aware of this when we busily assay to “standardize” all or even any of the adiaphoric traditions rampant in the visible church. It is for this reason that we did not make our personal observations on the luxuriant growth of minor “pretty” little customs, like pouring baptismal water from seashells, using little lace napkins to dry the child’s head, ringing chimes at each benediction pronounced over the confirmands, how to make the sign of the cross at Communion (with or without chalice in hand), individual cups, kneeling for distribution, kneeling benches for post-communion prayer, etc, etc.

We must remember that the epitome of our message in word and deed is to

“repudiate the lie men tell of life,
that it shall pass as fragile flower or butterfly
whose dust shall nourish April grass.
Since One for love died on a tree
and in a stony tomb was lain—
Behold, I show you a mystery—
All sepulchres are sealed in vain.

This takes the working of an unencumbered Gospel. So -- Preach it : Practice it

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The above references are in addition to the Scripture itself, together with a number of commentaries in common usage.

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