

a ROODCROFT paper

Why Closed Communion

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WHY shouldn't an Episcopal Priest "Invite Everybody To Communion?"

For three reasons: 1. The rule of the Church; 2. The nature of the Church; and 3. The nature and character of the service.

1. *The rule of the Church.* After the Confirmation service comes this rubric:

"And there shall none be admitted to the Holy Communion, until such time as he be confirmed, or ready and desirous to be confirmed."

This is the oldest rubric in the Prayer Book. It was first promulgated by Archbishop Peckham of Canterbury about the year 1290 in order to restore the recognized apostolic practice of having Baptism confirmed by the head of the diocese or his representative. The rule had been carelessly regarded in medieval days, and the reform seems to have been quickly accepted; it has been practised ever since. This is a genuine instance of reformation within the Church.

It is sometimes contested by those who wish to argue that, in the "invitation" before the General Confession in Holy Communion, the priest invites everybody who truly and earnestly repents of his

sins, to receive Holy Communion with us. This is a genuine instance of rationalization, which is always an attempt to find plausible legal justification for an act after it has been performed because of the sincere desire of the performer. Study of this paragraph and its preceding rubric will discover that it is not an invitation to people "to come to Holy Communion;" rather it is in the form of a warning and assurance to those who do come. It is not a promiscuous admission of everybody who considers himself qualified; it is a final word of encouragement to those who have met the qualifications prescribed by the Church and who know full well that they have been sinners. This is substantiated by the history of the rubric.

The misnamed "Invitation" was written in English, apparently by Cranmer, in 1548 as a part of the *Order of Communion*, which was directed to be used in the Latin Mass immediately after communion of the priest. The laymen who expected to receive Holy Communion came forward at that time and stood at the entrance to the Sanctuary. The *Order* prescribed that the priest should first warn away all who were in sin of which they had not repented. After a pause which gave these

an opportunity to withdraw (such a pause was apparently needed or it would not have been prescribed) the priest was to address *all who remained*, according to the rubric which still precedes, and say "Ye who do truly repent, etc." The old warning to withdraw has been preserved, in enlarged verbiage, in the fourth and fifth of the "General Rubrics" now on pages 84-85 of the Prayer Book.

The rules of the Episcopal Church include far more than Confirmation, or readiness and desire to receive it, as qualifications, for reception of Holy Communion.

The various exhortations, printed at the end of the service, go into specific details about careful self-examination and confession of sins (variously interpreted) as requirement for worthy reception. That this rule is not observed by many priests and laymen reflects no blame upon the provisions of the Church. It merely signifies that some individuals consider that they may use their own judgment in the extent and method by which they keep rules.

Whether the Confirmation rubric is a good rule or a bad one does not arise here. If it is ever

changed, it must be by the act of the Church. Moreover, if the Oddfellows propose to discuss a change in rules, they do not invite the Masons to debate it with them. Only the members of a body can determine the rules of the body. Until or unless it is changed, it stands a part of the rule of the Church.

The clergy of the Church have only three choices in their attitude to the rule.

(1) They may keep it. (2) They may break it and rationalize their action. (3) They may break it without rationalizing their action. If some priests break it, we can understand that they discountenance the ideal which the Church officially sustains. We can only say that, if a growing majority of priests prefer to live by the ideal to which they have pledged themselves, they cannot be faulted for those convictions. Nor can they be faulted if they decline to enter into argument and defend themselves for keeping their pledges. Arguments become necessary not for keeping pledges, but for breaking them. Each priest has to make his own decision for conduct, and determine whether he will make for union or for disunion within the Church of which he is an official representative.

2. *The nature of the Church*

By almost all post-reformational churches a church is regarded as a voluntary association of individuals who are in more or less agreement with one another. If they disagree, and they often do, they are free to seek another church which will be more in harmony with their opinions, or to start a new church if they can. Any individual church is competent to announce its doctrines and practices and to change them if it so desires. Whether any two churches can unite their organizations without agreement in doctrine or principle has to be determined by those churches.

Throughout the history of Christendom there have arisen those who disagreed with this or that teaching or practice of the Church. Those who disagreed have always contended that they were more accurate interpreters of the Gospel, whatever that was. By the fourth century it became necessary for the historical Church to determine just what constituted the Church itself, and to embody this pattern in what were called Canons, or rules, of the Councils of Bishops. Without making a logical declaration, which would specify the principles of

their decisions, they nevertheless declared certain principles which would serve to define the historic Church.

In the early Church there was no conception of unity of organization of the whole Church. The units of organization were dioceses and provinces geographically determined. Despite the fact that they had no unity of organization, they nevertheless recognized that they were one in many respects which could be grouped under the general term *Apostolicity*. Five factors were recognized as having definite historical character which made their churches one despite lack of organizational unity. These five common factors which linked them with the Apostles were: (1) the Scriptures (2) Doctrine (3) Worship (4) Order and (5) Manner of life. And no one questioned that the Apostles had been commissioned by the Lord Christ, who was the Center of all.

(1) They preserved their tradition in the same Scriptures. What makes any collection of writings a Bible is the fact that from these alone are selections read at public services, and that these are of the primary authority as bases of faith. Regarding itself as the "true Israel of God" the Church had

always accepted the Old Testament, including the Apocrypha, as Sacred Scriptures. In the course of the first two centuries many other writings were regarded as properly interpretative of the Scriptures and were therefore considered of equal authority. A glance at what is called the *New Testament Apocrypha* will indicate many writings which were regarded as scriptural in some churches and rejected in others. The councils of bishops had to determine just what writings should be considered apostolic and what should not. From the fourth century these "apostolic" writings — they were called the *New Testament* — with the Old Testament, including the Apocrypha, have been considered the Sacred Scriptures of the historic Church.

(2) They recognized a unity of doctrine which gave warrant and explanation for the Church's faith and worship. Again, as might well be expected at first, many churches promulgated doctrines which were rejected by others. Once more it became necessary to determine which doctrines were "apostolic" and which were not. This gave rise to the documents which are now called *The Apostles' Creed* and *The Nicene Creed*, which

were formulated in the fourth century as recognized apostolic teaching, and have always been regarded by the historic Church as criteria of doctrine.

(3) They recognized unity of worship. Despite minor liturgical differences, what we now call the Holy Eucharist has always been the great act of worship of the historic Church. In the ancient liturgies, the first part of the service was for Christians and for those who were preparing to become Christians. At a given sign these latter were dismissed; the remainder of the service was for those who had complied with the rules of the Church and had been baptized. The Baptism came after long preparation and teaching and was, in all instances, the *sine qua non* of admission to Holy Communion. Baptism consisted of immersion in running water (it was called "living water"), or of pouring the water upon the head of the candidate after he had avowed his acceptance of the historic doctrine, and pledged to live the new life. This was followed by anointing and imposition of hands of the bishop. In the Eastern churches this was done by the bishop, in early days, immediately after Baptism. Eventually the priest who had bap-

tized was also delegated to give the anointing and imposition of hands immediately afterward. In the western churches this second part of the service was still reserved for the bishop; it was postponed until a few years after Baptism, and was called Confirmation. The Bishop, representing the whole Church, confirmed the Baptism which had been administered by the priest. Meanwhile the candidates had been given sufficient instruction to enable them to have understanding of what was being done. Carelessness in completion of Baptism arose in the western churches; to the correction of this Peckham gave his attention. Today, in the eastern churches, Confirmation is administered normally by the priest with chrism provided for him by the bishop. In the Roman Church a priest, under exceptional circumstances, may be licensed by his bishop to administer Confirmation. In the Anglican communion Confirmation is still reserved for the bishop.

(4) They recognized unity of Order. Very early in the history of the Church arose all sorts of carelessness with regard to ordination of men who were to be the official leaders of worship, the official interpreters of doctrine, and the official pat-

terms of life in the Church. The first question which arose was, How is ordination to be administered? The early decision was that it must be administered by the Bishop of the diocese or by another bishop whom he recognized as having authority to ordain. The next question was natural, What is a bishop? The answer, by way of preserving traditional apostolic practice, was: A bishop must be consecrated by three bishops who are so recognized in the Church.

(5) They recognized a unity of disciplined Christian life marked by certain rules recognized as scriptural. These rules included such items as fasting, participation in worship, reception of Holy Communion after careful self examination and confession of sins, and many rules of conduct. To be a Christian meant not merely announcement of "general agreement with Christian principles." It involved careful instruction in doctrine, careful devotion to worship, and careful interpretation and practice of the rules of life. It was soon seen that keeping of these rules bound Christians together in a peculiar way.

These five factors of unity constituted a clear ideal. Because men were human, and therefore

frail, many discrepancies could be noted. However, the ideal was clearly determined and was recognized by all who professed and called themselves Christians.

In the Western Church a brand new ideal of unity arose; while it did not supplant the five historic factors, it did attain priority. This was the idea of unity of organization with a single head; union with and acceptance by that head became the rule in the Western Church. Therefore, while there never was such a thing as "the Eastern Church," organizationally speaking, there was a Western Church, with the Church of Rome as the head.

By the sixteenth century it was generally recognized in the west that the "Western Church" had developed some very unlovely characteristics, the natural result of organizational monopoly. Three proposals were made for reformation of these abuses. From these proposals have arisen the three kinds of western Christianity which we know today.

(1) The Church of Rome proposed that it would reform conditions, and for this purpose called the Council of Trent. The result of that long drawn out Council was the strengthening of

the organizational factor and the rigid demand that the approval of Rome be the criterion for distinction between genuine and spurious Christianity. Moral conditions were definitely improved; in this respect the Council of Trent achieved its purpose. And thenceforth the Church of Rome could present its pleas for unity with no mistaking the kind of unity it meant.

(2) Continental European Christians were convinced that the only way to reformation was to begin wholly anew. They attacked one or more of the five marks of apostolic unity, and every post-reformational church altered or deleted one or more of these. The Apocrypha was banished from the Scriptures upon the assigned reason that it had no Hebrew original; the real reason was that various individuals disapproved of some or all of its books. Some even tried to delete parts of the New Testament which seemed to disagree with doctrines they deemed important. We note that these individuals first decided upon the doctrines and then chose such parts of the historic Scriptures as seemed to support those doctrines. They did not regard themselves primarily as interpreters of existent Scriptures. Post-reformational Christendom

has been almost universally in agreement with this principle.

The vast majority of post-reformation churches have simply disregarded historic Christian worship and have used the word *worship* to describe almost any kind of sacred songs, individual prayers, a sermon and a collection. Their plea is that the chief purpose of worship is "to hear the word."

Practically every post-reformational church discarded entirely the Nicene Creed and tinkered with the Apostles' Creed in many ways. These were no longer regarded as standards of apostolic doctrine; a Christian could believe almost anything he pleased. Some churches, like the Baptist, made a point of declaring that they had no creed. The result of all this has been development of almost every kind of "liberalism" which can be imagined. The two "doctrines" upon which all seemed to be agreed were the words of *God* and *Jesus*, which were given every kind of interpretation.

By the very nature of the constitution, post-reformation churches had to abandon the unity of order entirely; innumerable rationalizations of this were devised to quiet the consciences of their mem-

bers. Bishops were no longer necessary and even the word was dropped from their vocabulary. The Methodists in America resumed use of the word, but it did not mean the same thing to them that it meant to historic Christianity. In fact they provided that, if for any reason their church were left without bishops, three elders could start the succession again. Thus they continued the word but gave it a new definition, which was made necessary by the fact that John Wesley had disapproved even the use of the word.

Finally, most post-reformation churches did away with the rule of disciplined life in the interest of spontaneity and emotional expression. The whole concept of the life of a Christian was totally different from that of the historic Church. It may have been better, or it may have been worse; it was different.

(3) The Church of England in the sixteenth century likewise recognized the need for reform, but it took a different method. While instituting many changes in details of the work of the Church, it strictly maintained and preserved in its Book of Common Prayer the five historic factors of Christian unity based upon apostolicity. These are

what differentiate the Anglican communion from all churches which began in or after the sixteenth century. Adherence to these, like adherence to all ideals, has been somewhat irregular but the ideals were preserved. It is not always easy to maintain ideals, especially when one's friends do not believe in them. An increasing number of priests are discovering that only by adherence to these concrete marks of apostolicity can they really do the work described by the Book of Common Prayer. At the same time they who disapprove of the ideals have no hesitancy in rationalizing their conduct and even finding many to agree with them. Modern Americans are not conspicuous for rigidity of thinking and living.

It is curious that post-reformationalism today is advocating the very principle which its founders so firmly decried. They are thinking in terms of organizational unity and they therefore make it prior to the five historic marks of apostolicity. They expect, to be sure, that the unity will be such as they devise. They happily envisage a huge organization which will eventually put to shame the historic champion of organizational unity, the Church of Rome. Naturally they have to be op-

posed to Rome; any other attitude would discountenance their cause.

3. *The nature of Holy Communion.*

Post-reformational Christians, for the most part, regard it as an occasionally-observed memento of the death of Christ, and their approach is generally on the sad side. It is *not* their great act of worship; it is an occasional act which comes after what is called worship.

The Episcopal Church, bound by the five factors of apostolic unity, maintains that the Eucharist, or Holy Communion, is the great act of worship of the Church, as it has been throughout history, and that it is the only worship which unites it with apostolic Christianity. Despite the fact that the ideal is not always maintained, one cannot read the Book of Common Prayer without discovering that more attention is given by this book to the Eucharist (203 pages) than to any other act of worship. The service itself is regarded not as an occasional sad memento of a regrettable event in the past, but as the glad and joyful means of union with the sacrificial life of the risen and ascended Christ who has given the Holy Spirit in order to continue that life. It is small wonder that an increasing number of Episcopalians are coming to

realize the ideal which has been preserved for them in the Prayer Book but not always recognized and emphasized. They are not introducing something new; they are coming to appreciate their blessings.

The Episcopal Church laments, as all do, that those who profess and call themselves Christians are divided by their sincere convictions into many groups. She recognizes that for us to pretend to be one when we are many would be mere pretense if it involved surrender of conscientious convictions, some of which have been held for three or four centuries, and others for nineteen. She knows that the Holy Communion, in all the history of the Church, has never been regarded as a means of bringing men into union with apostolic Christianity; it has always been a sacrament of unity which was already existent. She is also convinced that union with apostolic Christianity is the only means by which all will ultimately become one, and that deviation from the five protective physical marks of this spiritual union will produce not unity but greater confusion. She respects the convictions of those who differ from her and hopes that they will respect hers. Therefore, without contempt or argument or condemnation or belligerency, she hopes

that all will understand that she is as humbly sincere in maintaining these marks of apostolic Christianity as are those who fault her for doing so.