

## FENCING THE TABLE

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### A. Definition

"Fencing the table" refers to the liturgical exclusion of persons who ought not to partake of the Lord's supper. The *Oxford English Dictionary* associates the phrase (meaning "to deliver an exhortation calculated to deter unworthy persons from communicating") with the Scottish Presbyterian churches, but the practice was characteristic of the liturgies of all the Reformed churches in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries where it functioned as part of a broader ecclesiastical discipline. As George Burnet observes, "The fencing was meant to be a final or last-minute challenge to the conscience of the communicant to examine himself."<sup>1</sup>

### B. Pre-Reformation History

Justin Martyr, writing around the middle of the second century, enunciated the principle that lies behind the practice of fencing the table.

And we call this food 'thanksgiving' [*εὐχαριστία*]; and no one may partake of it unless he is convinced of the truth of our teaching, and has been cleansed with the washing for forgiveness of sins and regeneration, and lives as Christ handed down.<sup>2</sup>

It was the practice of the church in the third and fourth centuries to dismiss noncommunicants from the service at the point of the observance of the Lord's Supper, leaving only the faithful and their children (who also communicated, with infants receiving the cup only).<sup>3</sup> The worship services of the church were not open to the public. Non-Christian "hearers"<sup>4</sup> were

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<sup>1</sup> George B. Burnet, *The Holy Communion in the Reformed Church of Scotland 1560-1960* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1960) 39.

<sup>2</sup> *First Apology*, 66.1. *Prayers of the Eucharist: Early and Reformed*, trans. and ed. R. C. D. Jasper and G. J. Cuming, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford UP, 1980) 19.

<sup>3</sup> William D. Maxwell, *An Outline of Christian Worship: Its Developments and Forms* (London: Oxford UP, 1936) 18.

<sup>4</sup> *Audientes, ἀκροάμενοι*. "In the West it was equivalent to Catechumen. In the Greek system it was the name of the lowest but one order of penitents, who were only admitted into the *ναρθήξ*, or vestibule of the church." E. E. Hammond, ed. *Liturgies Eastern and Western* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1878) 386.

admitted (following private interviews to determine serious intent) but were dismissed before the celebration of the Lord's Supper along with the catechumens who were in active preparation for church membership. The motive was sanctity, not secrecy as in the "mystery religions."

The liturgy contained in the *Apostolic Constitutions*, compiled around A.D. 380, reflects the fencing practice of the post-apostolic church.

. . . the chief deacon 'fences' the Table, forbidding any 'who are not of the faithful', or 'who have aught against any', or who 'are in hypocrisy' to remain, bidding all 'with fear and trembling to stand upright before the Lord to offer.'<sup>1</sup>

A number of developments affected this practice in the succeeding centuries. The discontinuance of the catechumenate rendered their dismissal obsolete, and it was dropped from the Roman rite.<sup>2</sup> More significantly, beginning with the Constantinian era the people began to partake of the elements less and less frequently. By 1215 the minimum requirement for lay communication, now restricted to the bread only, had become once-a-year, at Easter.<sup>3</sup> As the sacrifice of the mass and the adoration of the elements replaced communion as the focus of the sacrament, fencing the table became liturgically irrelevant.<sup>4</sup>

### C. Luther's Liturgical Reform

Martin Luther's *Formula of Mass and Communion for the Church at Wittenberg* (1523) indicates a self-conscious break with Rome on the essential nature of the sacrament. "Therefore repudiating all those things which smack of sacrifice and of the offertory, together with the entire *canon*, let us retain those things which are pure and holy, and then we will order our Mass in this fashion."<sup>5</sup> As might be expected, the revised rite contains a section "Concerning the Communion of the People."

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<sup>1</sup>Maxwell 30.

<sup>2</sup>*The Study of Liturgy* 188. The mass of the Roman rite cannot be dated precisely; the oldest manuscripts date from the eighth century. The text was standardized in 1571.

<sup>3</sup> Maxwell 65.

<sup>4</sup> "It is common knowledge that in the medieval Church the Sacrifice of the Mass seldom included Communion for the worshippers. Mass, especially High Mass, was for the priests alone: the congregation merely 'assisted' by their presence and in their responses, but did not partake of any bread or wafer." Burnet 16.

<sup>5</sup> *Formula Missae. Prayers of the Eucharist* 136f.

. . . now we will speak about the custom of communicating the people, on account of whom chiefly this Supper of the Lord was instituted and is called by that name.

. . . notice must first be given to the bishop [minister], by those who are about to commune, that they request to be communicated with the Lord's Supper, so that he may be able to know both their names and manner of life. Then let him not admit those seeking, unless they should give a reason for their faith; and being questioned, should answer, whether they understand what the Supper of the Lord is; what it stands for; and of what they wish to become partakers by its use; . . .

But I think it will be sufficient if this questioning and investigation of him who seeks to be communicated is done once a year. Indeed it is possible that the one who seeks may be so understanding that he should be questioned either once only in his entire life, or in fact never. For through this custom we desire to guard against this: that the worthy and unworthy do not rush blindly to the Supper of the Lord, as we have seen done in the Roman Church hitherto, where nothing else is sought but to be communicated. Of faith, of comfort, of the whole use and fruits of the Supper absolutely neither mention nor consideration of these has had a place. . . . But those who are not able to answer after the manner mentioned above, we desire such wholly excluded and banished from the communion of this Supper, as being without the wedding garment. . . .

Then when Mass is celebrated, it is fitting that those about to be communicated gather together by themselves in one place and in one group. . . . Not that standing here or there matters anything with God or adds anything to faith, but that it is necessary that they be seen and known openly, both by those who commune and those who do not commune; thus then their lives may be the better observed and proven and made known. For participation in this Supper is part of the confession by which they confess before God and angels and men that they are Christians.<sup>1</sup>

In the preface to *The German Mass and Order of Service* (1526) Luther distinguished between three kinds of services. The Latin and German orders of service, which Luther still calls "the mass" for pragmatic reasons, are for public use in the churches for all the people, among whom, he says, "are many who do not believe and are not yet Christians." He continues with the reason for this condition: "For there is as yet no well-ordered and organized congregation here, in which the Christians could be ruled according to the Gospel. Our Service is a public provocation to faith and to Christianity."<sup>2</sup> But all things being equal, Luther would prefer that the Lord's Supper be observed according to a third way:

The third kind of Service which a truly Evangelical Church Order should have would not be held in a public place for all sorts of people, but for those who

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<sup>1</sup> Bard Thompson, *Liturgies of the Western Church* (Cleveland, Ohio: World, 1961) 115-117.

<sup>2</sup> Thompson 125.

mean to be real Christians and profess the Gospel with hand and mouth. They would record their names on a list and meet by themselves in some house in order to pray, read, baptize, receive the Sacrament and do other Christian works. In this manner those who do not lead Christian lives could be known, reproved, reclaimed, cast out or excommunicated, according to the rule of Christ in Matthew XVIII. . . .

But as yet I neither can nor desire to begin, or to make rules for such a congregation or assembly. I have not yet the persons necessary to accomplish it; nor do I observe many who strongly urge it. If circumstances should force me to it and I can no longer refuse with a good conscience, I shall gladly do my part and help as best I may. In the meanwhile the two kinds of service mentioned must suffice . . . <sup>1</sup>

As a step in the direction of excluding from the Lord's Supper those who have no right to partake of it, Luther's German "mass" includes the following admonition before the consecration of the elements.

I admonish you in Christ, that ye look upon the Testament of Christ in true faith, above all having confident assurance in your hearts in the words by which Christ grants us His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. That ye remember and give thanks to His boundless love, of which He gave proof when He redeemed us by His blood from God's wrath, sin, death, and hell, and thereupon take to yourselves eternally the bread and wine, that is, His body and blood, as your guarantee and pledge. In His Name therefore, and according to His command, let us proceed by the use of His own words to the observance and administration of the Testament.<sup>2</sup>

#### D. Early Reformed Liturgies

Zwingli presents the principle of fencing the table in the introduction to what has come to be known as *The Zurich Liturgy* (1525).

We are also prepared, in keeping with divine ordinances, to exclude from this Supper all those who defile the body of Christ with intolerable stains and blemishes, because a communion of Christians and a pure, devout life ought to follow this memorial of Christ's passion and thanksgiving for His death.<sup>3</sup>

How this is to be carried out is elaborated in a separate booklet, *Ratschlag betreffend Ausschluss vom Abendmahl*, published the same year. The principle is given liturgical

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<sup>1</sup> Thompson 125f.

<sup>2</sup> Thompson 133.

<sup>3</sup> Thompson 150.

expression by expanding the reading of the words of institution from 1 Corinthians 11 to include verses 27-29, and by including the following words of invitation and caution.

Dear brothers, in keeping with observance and institution of our Lord Jesus Christ, we now desire to eat the bread and drink the cup which He has commanded us to use in commemoration, praise and thanksgiving that He suffered death for us and shed His blood to wash away our sin. Wherefore, let everyone call to mind, according to Paul's word, how much comfort, faith and assurance he has in the same Jesus Christ our Lord, lest anyone pretend to be a believer who is not, and so be guilty of the Lord's death. Neither let anyone commit offense against the whole Christian communion, which is the body of Christ.<sup>1</sup>

Oecolampadius included in his *Form and Manner of the Lord's Supper* (1525?) an admonition following the sermon as the congregation prepared to observe the sacrament.

I admonish all who now desire to receive this sacrament to prove themselves beforehand, whether they understand and hold the mystery of the sacrament, lest the pearls be cast before swine, and they be guilty of the body and blood of Christ.

Our mystery is: that Christ is for us the bread of life: which we attest with thanksgiving by this sacramental bread. Above all, therefore, each communicant of the Supper ought to know that his sins are forgiven through the passion of Christ. He should likewise verify in himself that such faith and trust now incites him to a new, peaceful, and God-fearing life. Furthermore, we declare ourselves to be united here in the one body of Christ, as disclosed in the unity of faith; and the substance of our faith is this:

[The Apostles' Creed]

Likewise, we have excluded those who are banned by the Word of God and who rack the body of Christ as unsound and withered members. Here in this Supper, we should not and cannot have fellowship with idolaters, sorcerers, blasphemers, despisers of God's Word and of the holy sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Let those be excluded from us who do not honor their father and mother, who are disobedient to the civil authority, being rebellious and loath to meet their interest, taxes, etc., those who are not willing in matters of faith to be guided by the Word alone. Excluded are: all murderers and those who do not put aside their envy, all who cause strife for the sake of mischief, fornicators, adulterers, drunkards and gluttons, thieves, robbers, usurers or those who promote improper gain, business or trade, those who look only to themselves, idlers who by their sloth are a burden upon their neighbors, all false witnesses and oppressors of righteousness. For they all lack faith and are mockers of God, who desires to have a holy courageous people. Likewise, if anyone ventures to be caught in these or similar vices henceforth, he shall submit to brotherly correction in a good spirit, and since he has offended the Congregation, shall reconcile himself to it by a new life.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thompson 153.

<sup>2</sup> Thompson 211f.

Martin Bucer in the 1530's emphasized the need for discipline in order to maintain the ideal of the church as a community of love but was only partially successful in introducing such at Strassburg. His *Strassburg Liturgy* (1539) called for a four-point explanation of the gospel and the meaning of the Lord's supper, but stopped short of fencing the table, a defect shortly remedied by Calvin.

#### E. Calvin's Liturgical Reform

John Calvin, *The Form of Church Prayers*, Geneva, 1542 and Strassburg, 1545. "The Manner of Celebrating the Lord's Supper" begins with the notice to be given the week before.

*It is proper to observe that on the Sunday prior to the celebration of the Lord's Supper, the following admonitions are made to the people: first, that each person prepare and dispose himself to receive it worthily and with such reverence that it deserves; second, that children may certainly not be brought forward unless they are well instructed and have made profession of their faith in church; third, that if strangers are there who may still be untaught and ignorant, they proceed to present themselves for private instruction.<sup>1</sup>*

On the day of observance, the minister is to explain, either at the conclusion of the sermon or in the body of the sermon itself, "what our Lord wishes to say and signify by this mystery, and in what way it behooves us to receive it." In the liturgy itself, the excommunication, self-examination, and invitation follow the reading of the words of institution in 1 Corinthians 11:23-29.

We have heard, my brethren, how our Lord observed His Supper with His disciples, from which we learn that strangers and those who do not belong to the company of His faithful people must not be admitted. Therefore, following that precept, in the name and by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, I excommunicate all idolaters, blasphemers and despisers of God, all heretics and those who create private sects in order to break the unity of the Church, all perjurers, all who rebel against father or mother or superior, all who promote sedition or mutiny; brutal and disorderly persons, adulterers, lewd and lustful men, thieves, ravishers, greedy and grasping people, drunkards, gluttons, and all those who lead a scandalous and dissolute life. I warn them to abstain from this Holy Table, lest they defile and contaminate the holy food which our Lord Jesus Christ gives to none except they belong to His household of faith.

Moreover, in accordance with the exhortation of St. Paul, let every man examine and prove his own conscience to see whether he truly repents of his faults

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<sup>1</sup> Thompson 203f.

and grieves over his sins, desiring to live henceforth a holy life according to God. Above all, let him see whether he has his trust in the mercy of God and seeks his salvation wholly in Jesus Christ and, renouncing all hatred and rancor, has high resolve and courage to live in peace and brotherly love with his neighbors.

If we have this witness in our hearts before God, never doubt that He claims us as His children, and that the Lord Jesus addresses His Word to us, to invite us to His Table and to give us this holy Sacrament which He imparted to His disciples. . . .

[An extended invitation of four paragraphs follows.]<sup>1</sup>

#### F. The English Reformation

The First and Second Prayer Books of Edward VI (1549 and 1552) contain the following statement concerning preparation for communion.

So many as intend to be partakers of the holy Communion, shall signify their names to the Curate, over night: or else in the morning, afore the beginning of Matins, or immediately after.

And if any of those be an open and notorious evil liver, so that the congregation by him is offended, or have done any wrong to his neighbours, by word, or deed: The Curate shall call him, and advertise him, in any wise not to presume to the Lord's table, until he have openly declared himself, to have truly repented, and amended his former naughty life: that the congregation may thereby be satisfied, which afore were offended: and that he have recompensed the parties, whom he hath done wrong unto, or at the least be in full purpose so to do, as soon as he conveniently may.

The same order shall the Curate use, with those betwixt whom he perceiveth malice, and hatred to reign, not suffering them to be partakers of the Lord's table, until he know them to be reconciled. And if one of the parties so at variance, be content to forgive from the bottom of his heart, all that the other hath trespassed against him, and to make amends for that he himself hath offended: and the other party will not be persuaded to a godly unity, but remain still in his frowardness and malice: The Minister in that case, ought to admit the penitent person to the holy Communion, and no him that is obstinate.<sup>2</sup>

Both prayer books contain exhortations on self-examination and on the duty of communicating to be used at the discretion of the minister. The second is stronger in its approach to the negligent. Those who have no intention of partaking of the elements are advised to "depart you hence and give place to them that be Godly disposed," though they are assured that prayers

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<sup>1</sup> Thompson 205f.

<sup>2</sup> Thompson 244f.

will be offered at communion on their behalf that they may be "by God's grace return to a better mind."<sup>1</sup>

The Edwardian liturgy itself prescribes the following invitation:

You that do truly and earnestly repent you of your sins, and be in love and charity with your neighbours, and intend to lead a new life, following the commandments of God, and walking from henceforth in his holy ways: Draw near, and take this holy Sacrament to your comfort: make your humble confession to almighty God before this congregation here gather together in his holy name, meekly keeling upon your knees.<sup>2</sup>

### G. The Scottish Reformation

John Knox, *The Forme of Prayers*, Geneva, 1556. The exhortation begins by incorporating material from the Edwardian liturgy, but soon takes a more expressly evangelical turn, with emphasis on the merits and perfection of Christ as alone constituting the worthiness of those who commune, and on the lifting up of the minds of the faithful to heaven where Christ dwells, very God and very man, to receive him.<sup>3</sup>

"But catechising alone was not held to be sufficient. There was a public and special examination of old and young in the church, usually a week or more before the Communion. This 'diet of examination' took the place of confession and absolution before Easter in the Old Church. It was an understood preliminary to every celebration for 'such as are to be admitted to the table of the Lord Jesus.'<sup>4</sup>

### H. The Westminster Directory

The fencing principle was stated by the Westminster divines in the *Directory for the Public Worship of God* (1644) as follows: "The ignorant and the scandalous are not fit to receive the sacrament of the Lord's Supper" (Celebration of Communion, ¶2). The paragraph as originally proposed read as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> Thompson 275.

<sup>2</sup> Thompson 277f.

<sup>3</sup> Thompson 302f.

<sup>4</sup> Burnet 48.

None to be admitted, but such as, being baptized, are found upon careful examination by the ministers, before the officers, to have a competent measure of knowledge of the grounds of religion, and ability to examine themselves, and who profess their willingness and promise to submit themselves to all the ordinances of Christ [or thus, *who give just grounds in the judgment of charity to conceive that there is faith and regeneration wrought in them*]. The ignorant, scandalous, etc., not to be admitted, nor strangers unless they be well known.<sup>1</sup>

The issue was addressed again later in the Larger Catechism: "May any who profess the faith, and desire to come to the Lord's Supper, be kept from it?" Answer: "Such as are found to be ignorant or scandalous, notwithstanding their profession of the faith, and desire to come to the Lord's Supper, may and ought to be kept from that sacrament, by the power which Christ hath left in his church, until they receive instruction, and manifest their reformation" (q. 174).

The *Directory for Public Worship* put the following Exhortation, Warning, and Invitation immediately before the Consecration and Distribution of the elements.

When the day is come for administration, the Minister having ended his Sermon and Prayer, shall make a short Exhortation,

*Expressing the inestimable benefit we have by this Sacrament; together with the ends and use thereof: setting forth the great necessity of having our comforts and strength renewed thereby in this our pilgrimage and warfare: How necessary it is that we come unto it with Knowledge, Faith, Repentance, Love, and with hungry and thirsting souls after Christ and his benefits: How great the danger, to eat and drink unworthily.*

*Next, he is, in the Name of Christ, on the one part, to warn all such as are Ignorant, Scandalous, Profane, or that live in any sin or offence against their knowledge or conscience, that they presume not to come to that holy Table, shewing them, That he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh judgment unto himself: And on the other part, he is in especial manner to invite and encourage all that labour under the sense of the burden of their sins, and fear of wrath, and desire to reach out unto a greater progress in Grace than yet they can attain unto, to come to the Lord's Table; assuring them, in the same Name, or ease, refreshing and strength to their weak and wearied souls.*

After this Exhortation, Warning, and Invitation ... The Minister is to begin the action with sanctifying and blessing the elements of Bread and Wine set before him ... having first in a few words shewed, That those elements, otherwise common, are now set apart and sanctified to this holy use, by the word of Institution and Prayer.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander F. Mitchell, *The Westminster Assembly: Its History and Standards* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board, 1897) 223, citing Lightfoot.

<sup>2</sup> Thompson 358f. Underlining added.

Let the words of Institution be read out of the Evangelists, or out of the first Epistle of the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians, Chapt. 11. verse 23. . . . to the 27 [sic] verse, which the Minister may, when he seeth requisite, explaine and apply.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thompson 358f. Underlining added.