

The Practice of Close Communion

Introduction

One of the most difficult circumstances that a Lutheran pastor and congregation have to deal with is visiting family and friends of members on a Communion Sunday. Pastors are held accountable by Christ for the proper administration of the Sacraments—preventing Spiritual harm to those who do not discern the Body and Blood of Christ in, with and under the bread and wine, while not withholding the blessings of this supper from those whom Christ has invited. “Close Communion” describes the practice of limiting reception to the Sacrament of the Altar to those who have been instructed in and hold to the chief articles of the faith.

This is especially vexing since a large number of Christian churches hold a very different view as to what takes place in Communion. This view holds that Communion—and indeed Baptism—are but symbols and not means by which God extends His grace to us, but rather an act of fellowship. Thus, the Lutheran—and historic—practice of requiring Confirmation prior to communing is seen as being exclusionary, arbitrary, loveless and downright unfriendly. To a Lutheran, however, this is an act of extraordinary love in guarding the unaware from “profaning” the blood of Christ.

All three accounts of the institution of the Lord’s Supper in the Gospels (Matthew 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:14-23) explicitly state that Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to His disciples saying, “*Take, eat; this—this bread, which I have just blessed and broken and am now giving to you—is My body.*” Jesus uses similar language in referring to “*the cup*” (of wine) as “*His blood.*” A plain and straightforward reading of these words leads to the conclusion that both bread and body, both wine and blood are present in the consecrated elements of the Lord’s Supper.

Perhaps the most explicit expression of this truth, however, is found in I Corinthians 10:16-17, where Paul writes: “*The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.*” Paul clearly says here that we all “partake” of “bread” when we receive the Lord’s Supper—even as we also partake of and “participate in” the true body of Christ. And he says that we all “partake” of the wine (the cup), even as we also partake of the true blood of Christ.

Similarly, in I Corinthians 11:26, Paul says: “*For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes.*” Paul expressly states here that when we receive the Lord’s Supper we are “eating bread” and “drinking the cup” (wine), but he goes on to say that those who eat this bread and drink this cup are also partaking of the true body and blood of Christ.

So “real” is this participation in Christ’s body and blood, in fact, that those who partake of the bread and wine “*in an unworthy manner*” are actually “*guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord*” (I Corinthians 11:27). The result may be sickness or even death (vs. 11:30).

1. Pastors—and indeed congregations—must practice Holy Communion in a loving and compassionate manner in accordance with Scripture.

The reason Lutherans practice Close Communion are two-fold: 1) to keep those who might partake of this Sacrament to their judgment from doing so because they take it without proper “*examination,*” and, or without “*recognizing the body of the Lord*”, (cf. I Corinthians 11:26-29); 2) To have all who commune with us truly be in communion with us, that is be one in faith, and one in the confession of that faith (cf. Acts 2:42; I Corinthians 10:16-18).

When excluding members of another confession of faith from the celebration of the Holy Supper in communion with us we are not denying them our fellowship, nor are we judging their faith. Rather, we are being honest about our confession of the Christ and His salvation offered in

the means of grace, and inviting them to be honest about what they believe in their confession of Christ and His salvation offered in the means of grace.

The issue is brought about by their profession of beliefs and practices that are not in keeping with the Lutheran faith. Lutherans do not take communion in churches with differing beliefs and ask that they not offer offense by professing one set of beliefs in their home church and another by participating in communion in a Lutheran church.

Any adult who is baptized and believes in Christ as his Savior is a full member of the Christian Church even though they may not commune with us. Note that infants are not communed at our altars yet they are considered full members of the Christian Church. They are baptized and they believe in Christ as their Savior. Holy Baptism unites us in the Christian Faith; Holy Communion unites us in the confession of that faith.

2. Pastors are accountable for the spiritual well-being of those whom they commune.

A Lutheran pastor is called to “preach the Word, and administer the Sacraments.” ‘To administer’ means more than to just offer Holy Communion, it means to be accountable and responsible for what is offered. Pastors are to “*Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with His own blood*” (Acts 20:28). The pastor is not the host, for the Lord is the host, but he does have authority and responsibility for its proper administration as the “*steward of the mystery*” (I Corinthians 4:1).

The ordained minister is a bondservant of Christ, a “called servant of the Word.” Any pastor who acts contrary to the Word will be brought into judgment by the Chief Shepherd (I Peter 5:2-4). “*Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness*” (James 3:1). And again, “*Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account*” (Hebrews 13:17).

3. In communing someone, we cannot judge their hearts, only their outward actions and statements.

We cannot judge someone’s heart—the inner thoughts, beliefs and attitudes of people—only the Spirit who “*searches all things*” can do this (I Corinthians 2:10). We do, however, judge the statements and actions as a confession of one’s beliefs. This also includes the beliefs implied by where they regularly go to church.

If someone is a member of a Baptist church and wish to commune with us, we must assume they truly believe that by the words of Christ, “*This is My Body...This is My Blood*” really means “*This symbolizes my body...This symbolizes my blood.*” They may in their hearts believe in the real presence—simply trusting these incredible words to be true—but we must stake everything on what they say and do, and nothing on what we think or hope they may believe. Faith in the heart is known only to God, but when it is confessed upon the lip, it can be known by all. The watchman is commanded to sound the warning in the hearing of all (Ezekiel 3:17-19), so that he is “*innocent of the blood of all men*” (Acts 20:26).

4. Practicing close communion is to love our neighbor.

Pastors and congregations who practice close communion do so out of a great love for souls and in faithful obedience to the Lord’s last will and testament. It is the Lord’s Supper, not the Christian’s. We do not prepare the meal, nor send the invitations. We only serve it as stewards of the mystery. And if we find the supper will prove dangerous to someone who, for example, cannot “*examine himself,*” or does not “*recognize the body of the Lord*” (I Corinthians 11:27,

29)—even if they have relatives who are sensitive members of the congregation (cf. Matthew 10:37)—we must deny it to them.

Actually, a congregation and its pastor that practice close communion as described in Scripture, is a very compassionate ministry of souls. Christian pastors and elders should take a serious interest in the spiritual welfare of their charge, and all who visit the Lord's Table. Paul calls upon the saints at Corinth to all "*speak the same thing*" (I Corinthians 1:10), a call for a common confession of the Gospel. Thus, Lutherans deliberately prepare our youth with confirmation to ready them for the Lord's Supper in true repentant faith and unity in receiving its gift of forgiveness and strengthened of faith.

5. Close communion is a practice that goes back to the first century church.

In the early church, seekers first came to Bible studies and then, if they wanted to seek membership, would come to worship as hearers. If wanted to continue towards membership, they entered a confirmation class confirmands. These hearers and confirmands were then dismissed after the Service of the Word and before the celebration of Holy Communion. During Communion, the doors of the assembly were closed and guarded by deacons and sub deacons" (Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries, Werner Elert, p. 75).

Before a guest in the early church could be admitted to the Lord's Table of the local congregation, one had to have on his person some proof that he was a communicate member of an orthodox Christian church. The Council of Carthage in the middle of the 4th century declared that no admittance to communion should be granted without a letter from a bishop. This explains the practice of "letters of transfer" today to show that those mentioned are ready to be received as communicant members of another congregation. Again, Elert writes of that time, "The modern theory that anybody may be admitted as a guest to the Sacrament in a church of differing confession, that people may communicate to and fro in spite of the absence of full church fellowship is unknown in the early church, indeed unthinkable" (p. 175).

6. What one believes and practices, rather than membership in the LCMS, is what is important.

Even members of the LCMS are not given automatic admission to the Lord's Supper, as one may be impenitent or have given evidence of major heresy. Church discipline calls for denying fellowship (common-union) at the altar because individuals under our spiritual care refuse to repent of their transgression against God's Law, and continue in their rebellion against Him. Also, some may proclaim unity of beliefs but take Communion to their judgment because they no longer believe or come to disdain Christ's blood because they no longer perceive its presence. We cannot control such a situation as God alone knows the heart.

Francis Pieper said, "Christian congregations, and their public servants, are only the administrators and not the lords of the Sacrament. The Lord's Supper is not their institution, but Christ's. Therefore they must follow Christ's instructions in administering the Sacrament. On the one hand, they are not permitted to introduce 'Open Communion'; on the other hand, they must guard against denying the Sacrament to those Christians for whom Christ has appointed it...Both pastor and congregation must most carefully guard against denying the Lord's Supper to anyone to whom Christ wants it to be given. In his day Luther had to warn not only against laxity in practice, but also against legalism and unnecessary rigor" (Christian Dogmatics, Vo. III, p. 381, 386).

7. Communion requires a "common union" of faith among the participants.

Holy Communion, according to Scripture, is a very public matter. It involves my standing with Christ my Savior, and my standing with those who gather with me at the altar of the Lord: "*Is not*

the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf. Consider the people of Israel: Do not those who eat the sacrifice participate in the altar?" (I Corinthians 10:16-18). Thus, the early church was unified in their beliefs before partaking of the Lord's Supper: *"They continued steadfast in the apostles' doctrine, then breaking of bread and in prayer"* (Acts 2:42). We are commanded to separate ourselves from those who teach other gospels, *"I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them"* (Romans 16:17).

The above Scriptures point out the two-fold nature of Holy Communion—like a cross extended upwards to Christ and outward to our fellow participants. That is why the Sacrament is called a Holy Communion—a holy community. We confess union with Christ and with one another as we go to the table of the Lord. And our unity is based on a common faith and on a common love for each other, which Matthew 5:23-24 anticipates: *"So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift."* Paul's prayer for believers as they congregate is that they *"be like-minded one toward another according to Christ Jesus: That you may with one mind, and with one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ"* (Romans 15:6; cf. I Corinthians 1:10). Therefore, Holy Community of a holy people is for those who with one mind and one voice confess the doctrine of salvation by faith in Christ as an act of God alone (Romans 9:16).

CONCLUSION

At a basic level, a Christian should be aware that when Jesus Christ died on the cross and rose from the dead, God pardoned us of all sin. As Scripture puts it, *"in Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them..."* (II Corinthians 5:19). Therefore, we have already been forgiven of our sins—those that we have done in the past and those that we will do in the future. This is what makes the work of Christ such good news! The means of grace are the conduits through which we come to know and believe this good news, and the means through which the forgiveness of Christ is continually made known and given to us.

Ironically, what is already ours becomes ours. Like water that already belongs to us in a storage facility, it becomes ours continually when it is piped into our house so that we can drink it. One theologian wrote, "If God had not forgiven all sins, there could be no means by which the forgiveness is offered." This is exactly correct.

The Gospel and the Sacraments, including the Lord's Supper, are the divinely ordained ways in which the merits of Christ are revealed, offered, and imparted to us. The words of institution in the Lord's Supper, then, are God's way of saying to us: "Your sins have been forgiven already, and again I am giving you anew this wonderful blessing. Be of good cheer. Your sins ARE forgiven." In this way we can go our way with a clear conscience and a renewed heart.

Finally, consider the benefits received. The first and foremost benefit is mentioned by Christ in His institution in the words of the text: *"My blood of the New Covenant which concerning many is being poured out for the forgiveness of sins"* (Matthew 26:28). It is this forgiveness of sins that is delivered to us by our Lord, through His own body and blood.

Now, you might wonder why this extra step is needed. Didn't Christ do all that was required to forgive my sins when He died on the cross? Yes, He did. Yet, the gift which Christ secured there He wants to deliver to us again and again in a personal and visible way through the Supper. We receive it in an individual, one-on-one basis. This forgiveness is "for you." This is in contrast to our

group general confession and absolution, where you receive forgiveness as a group. In the Lord's Supper, it comes to you individually—for you—by way of eating and drinking.

This forgiveness then provides a multitude of further blessings. This gives us power to live our daily lives, knowing our sins are forgiven and that we are God's blessed children. This supper also strengthens our faith. I Corinthians 11:26 says, "*For as often as you may eat this bread, and drink this cup, you solemnly proclaim the death of the Lord, until He shall come.*" In the Supper, our Lord holds before us the very price that was paid to secure the promises He makes to us. Christ paid with His body and blood, and in receiving them we are reminded of the promises of our Lord. This causes us to be renewed and strengthened in our faith in Christ and the fulfillment of His promises.