

THE PRACTICE OF CLOSE COMMUNION

The practice of close communion is an issue that is frequently misunderstood. This brochure is a brief attempt to describe the practice and the reasons for it.

The practice means that ordinarily pastors and churches commune only those individuals who are confirmed members in good standing of an LC-MS congregation or a church body with whom we are in full pulpit and altar fellowship.

Contrary to what many think, the practice of close communion is not new. At one time nearly every Lutheran church body in America and most other Christian churches practiced close communion. Close communion is talked about by Origin, (b. 185), Polycarp (born 69. A.D.), Justin Martyr (b. 100 A.D.), the Clementine liturgy, and the Didache (150 A.D.). These and many others from the early church all speak of closed communion and taught the same to their people.

The practice of open communion is traced to 1817. Then Emperor Frederick William III set up the Prussian Union and ordered those who disagreed on doctrine to commune together. This did not produce the union the emperor had hoped.

A second misunderstanding is that when we refuse to commune someone at our altar we are calling into question their Christian faith. This simply is not true. If this were true, we would be calling into question the faith of our own children prior to confirmation. Rather, close communion deals with a public confession of faith. Are those communing properly instructed, properly prepared, and are they in a position to proclaim an honest oneness with each other?

The practice of close communion flows out of our commitment to God's Word. The Sacrament of Holy Communion is not simply a personal, individual act. The celebration of Holy Communion is a public, corporate act of confession (1 Cor. 10: 17 - 21). When you commune at a church's altar, you are giving public testimony that you agree with that church's teaching. Holy Communion is called the highest expression of unity there is.

We believe that this agreement should be more than simple agreement on the basic Gospel message. We do not want people to be untrue to their own confession by communing at our altar. Nor do we wish, by communing them, to encourage them in beliefs on which we differ. "Close communion seeks to prevent a profession of confessional unity in faith where there is, in fact, disunity and disagreement" (Theology and Practice of the Lord's Supper, CTCR p. 21).

God said through Paul, "Mark those who teach contrary to the doctrine you have learned." If we don't mark them at communion, where, when and how would we mark those who teach something that is false?

Close communion is an effort on our part to be faithful to every portion of God's Word. Jesus said, "He who is faithful in little things will also be faithful in much" (Luke 16:10). Anytime we stray from God's Word we hurt ourselves and others (John 8:31-32). The early Christians were devoted to the apostles teaching or doctrine (Acts 2:42). In numerous places Paul stresses the importance of sound teaching. In doing so he makes clear that it includes more than simple Gospel. (See 2 Thess. 3:14-15, 1 Timothy 1:3, 1:10, 3:2, 4:1,6,7,,11,16, 6:3, 2 Timothy 1:13, 2 Timothy 3:16-17, 2 Timothy 4:2,3, Titus 1:9, 1:13, 2:1, 2:2, 2:7.

The one thing God looks for from His pastors and teachers is faithfulness (Jeremiah 23:28, 1 Corinthians 4:1-2). It is also clear that a part of our work is not only to proclaim the truth, but also to correct false teaching (2 Timothy 3:16-17, 2 Tim 4:2, Titus 1:9, Ezekiel 3:17-20, Ezekiel 33:7-9). In His last words Jesus said, "Teach them to obey everything I have commanded you."

Paul's prayer is that believers, as they come together, would with one heart and voice glorify God, that they would be like-minded, and that they would be in agreement (Romans 15:5-6, 1 Corinthians 1:10). Can we commune together if one confesses the Word to be verbally inspired and one does not; if one confesses that Christ is the only way of salvation, another confesses that Christ is one of many; if one confesses that Christ is in the sacrament and another does not; if one confesses homosexuality to be sinful and another does not?

As stated earlier, we believe that Holy Communion is the highest expression of unity and fellowship. As such we believe it is important to establish the fact that such unity exists and not simply pretend that it is present. It is certainly important for people to know what a church teaches before they are in a position to proclaim oneness there. That again, is why we take time to instruct our own children before communing them.

Some see close communion as a rather unloving thing to do. But love doesn't mean never admonishing, never correcting, never disciplining, never saying no. The answer to division and false teaching is not to ignore it or gloss over it. A paragraph from our Lutheran Confessions says it well:

"This will suffice concerning the controverted articles which have been disputed among theologians of the Augsburg confession for many years and in which some have erred and serious religious contentions have arisen. From our exposition friends and foes may clearly understand that we have no intention (since we have no authority to do so) to yield anything of the eternal and unchangeable truth of God for the sake of temporal peace, tranquility, and outward harmony. Nor would such peace and harmony last, because it would be contrary to the truth and actually intended for its suppression. Still less by far are we minded to whitewash or cover up any falsification of true doctrine or any publicly condemned errors. We have a sincere delight in and deep love for true harmony and are cordially inclined and determined on our part to do everything in our power to further the same. We desire such harmony as will not violate God's honor, that will not detract anything from the divine truth of the holy Gospel, that will not give place to the smallest error but will lead the poor sinner to true and sincere repentance, raise him up through faith, strengthen him in his new obedience, and thus justify and save him for ever through the sole merit of Christ, and so forth." (Formula of Concord, p. 632 paragraphs 94 - 96)

In addition to love another concern people have is for unity. Former synodical president Ralph Bohlmann put unity into perspective when he said:

The centrality of the Gospel for inter-Christian relationships ... must not only be remembered, but become part of the very being of individual Christians and of their corporate congregational and churchly actions. This is particularly the case when our concern for God's truth appears to be in conflict with our efforts to manifest our basic Christian unity or the love we have for other Christians ... [At such times] none of the three great principles--truth, unity, and love--can be omitted or curtailed. But our recognition of the centrality of the Gospel compels us to note that the truth principle is central to the other two. For the creation of unity and the exercise of love are both dependent upon the proclamation and administration of Gospel truth in Word and Sacraments. ...When practical choices must be made and tension exists between expressing Christian unity or proclaiming the truth of the Gospel, unity must yield to truth. For it is better to be divided for the sake of truth than to be united in error."

When we decline to give Holy Communion to persons not of our church body, we are not denying them salvation. We want to protect them from unworthy reception and judgment. (1 Corinthians 11:27-29) Love does not invite anyone to do something that may be spiritually harmful. It allows time for proper instruction. It proclaims the truth and it promotes true unity.

This practice is a practice which preserves and upholds the truth and power of God's Word and Sacraments. It is a practice which we Lutherans feel protects people. It is a practice that preserves integrity on our part and on theirs. We realize that not everyone agrees with us. We hope that our beliefs will be respected by those who differ with us. Our goal in holding this position is not to create ill will and hurt feelings. Hopefully, this brief explanation will help you or someone else understand that our motivation is a love for God, a love for God's Word, a love for the Sacrament, a love for the individual. It is love which is the motivation for our confessional practice of close communion.

We echo the paragraph printed on the inside cover of the Catholic, *Today's Missal*. "We welcome to this celebration of the Eucharist (this worship service) those Christians who are not fully united with us. It is a sad consequence of the sad divisions in Christianity that we cannot extend to them a general invitation to receive Communion. Catholics believe that the Eucharist is an action of the celebrating community signifying a oneness in faith, life, and worship of the community. Reception of the Eucharist by Christians not fully united with us would imply a oneness which does not yet exist, and for which we must all pray."

Often the practice of close communion is perceived as an function of the law. But nothing can be further from the truth. As stated in the document, *Theology and Practice of the Lord's Supper*, CTCR, p. 21 "This practice serves the Gospel." Dr. J.A. O. Preus III explains why:

It is because every false teaching is harmful to faith that Lutherans have always been vigilant about false teachings and practices among themselves as well as among other Christians. The reason for this is not due to a rigid or legalistic adherence to biblical propositions, but rather to their conviction that every error ultimately affects the Gospel negatively, which in turn robs Christ of His glory. And when Christ is robbed of His glory, troubled sinners cannot be comforted."

2 Thessalonians 3:14-15 makes clear that we are to admonish and correct even those who are our brothers. From those who disagree with our position I ask for understanding. There is a tremendous lack of denominational loyalty today. There is very little interest in doctrinal discernment. For many it makes little difference what a person believes as long as he is sincere. There are many who are concerned about pure air and pure water because they affect our life. At the

same time they have little concern for pure doctrine which effects our spiritual and eternal life (2 Peter 3:16, Matthew 15:8-9, Acts 17:11, John 8:31-32, Galatians 1:6-9).

Whether you are part of another denomination or are not part of any church, we are glad that you are here. We pray that God will bless you richly through His Word. If you are interested in finding out about the teachings of the Lutheran Church, the pastor here would be glad to visit with you about them.

(Much of this material has been taken from work previously done by Rev. Bernard Worrall, Rev. John I. Pless, Rev. Bradford E. Scott, Rev. Stanley Harding and Rev. Paul T. McCain - I thank them for their work.)

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It is most important that our teaching and practice be based on the Word of God. So the most important part of this document are the passages which follow:

1Co.10:17-21 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 sacrifices participate in the altar? Do I mean then that a sacrifice offered to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons.

Lu.16:10 "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much.

Jn.8:31-32 To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you **hold to my teaching**, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

Ac.2:42 They **devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching** and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

2Th.3:14-15 If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.

1Ti.1:3 As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer

1Ti.1:10 for adulterers and perverts, for slave traders and liars and perjurers--and for whatever else is contrary to the **sound doctrine**

1Ti.3:2 Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, **able to teach**,

1Ti.4:1 The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons.

1Ti.4:6-7 If you point these things out to the brothers, you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus, brought up in the truths of the faith and of the good teaching that you have followed. Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly.

1Ti.4:11 Command and teach these things.

1Ti.4:16 **Watch your life and doctrine closely**. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.

1Ti.6:3 If anyone teaches false doctrines and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching,

2Ti.1:13 What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of **sound teaching**, with faith and love in Christ Jesus.

2Ti.3:16-17 **All** Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for **teaching, rebuking, correcting** and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

2Ti.4:2-3 Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; **correct, rebuke** and encourage--with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when **men will not put up with sound doctrine**. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.

Tit.1:9 He must **hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught**, so that he can **encourage** others by sound doctrine and **refute** those who oppose it.

Tit.1:13 This testimony is true. Therefore, **rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith**

Tit.2:1-2 **You must teach what is in accord with sound doctrine**. Teach the older men to be temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled, and **sound in faith**, in love and in endurance.

Tit.2:7 In everything set them an example by doing what is good. **In your teaching show integrity**, seriousness

Je.23:28 Let the prophet who has a dream tell his dream, but **let the one who has my word speak it faithfully**. For what has straw to do with grain?" declares the LORD.

1Co.4:1-2 So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust **must prove faithful**.

Eze.3:17-20 "Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. When I say to a wicked man, 'You will surely die,' and **you do not warn him or speak out to dissuade him from his evil ways in order to save his life, that wicked man will die for [a] his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood**. But if you do warn the wicked man and he does not turn from his wickedness or from his evil ways, he will die for his sin; but you will have saved yourself. "Again, when a righteous man turns from his righteousness and does evil, and I put a stumbling block before him, he will die. Since you did not warn him, he will die for his sin. The righteous things he did will not be remembered, and I will hold you accountable for his blood.

Eze.33:7-9 "Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; **so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me**. When I say to the wicked, 'O wicked man, you will surely die,' and you do not speak out to dissuade him from his ways, that wicked man will die for [a] his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you do warn the wicked man to turn from his ways and he does not do so, he will die for his sin, but you will have saved yourself.

Ro.15:5-6 May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, **so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify** the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

1Co.1:10 I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be **no divisions** among you and that you may be **perfectly united in mind and thought**.

1Co.11:27-29 Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an **unworthy manner** will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to **examine himself before** he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord **eats and drinks judgment on himself**.

2Pe.3:16 He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people **distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction**.

Mt.15:8-9 "'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. **They worship me in vain**; their teachings are but rules taught by men.' [d]"

Ac.17:11 Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and **examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true**.

Ga.1:6-9 I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel-- which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: **If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!**