

## **Closed Communion:** **What We Believe and Practice**



Our church, along with those churches in line with historic Christianity, practices closed communion. This means that not everyone may come to our altar for communion. Only those who are members of our church, members of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, or of a church we are in full altar fellowship with, are welcome at our altar to receive the Lord's Supper. This is not just our practice, but an ancient, biblical practice.

Closed communion is not about people of other churches. We are not saying that we are better Christians or others are not worthy. Closed communion says that we are truly in agreement in all teachings with those with whom we commune. It is about fellowship between churches—not a person's feeling or faith. Traditionally, Holy Communion has been considered the highest form of fellowship—a public confession or testimony that we are united in every article of Christ's Gospel. Our practice of closed communion says that we take this visible confession very seriously.

The Lord's Supper is Jesus' body and blood given for the forgiveness of sins. In addition to

our relationship with God (through faith and repentance), there is another dimension to Holy Communion. Besides repentance (examining oneself and recognizing one's own sin), there is the outward unity expressed. God said through St. Paul in I Corinthians 10:16-17: "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." When we eat this sacred meal together we are forgiven, but we also express the unity of faith that we possess together. Because we do not have complete unity (in teaching) with all other churches, it would not be appropriate or honest to allow someone belonging to another church to commune at our altar. We go by the outward teaching of a church and the membership of people—we are not judging individuals by having closed communion.

Church membership shows our loyalty. It should match our faith. It is the outward badge that shows which teaching a person believes. For example, if I wear a University of Texas shirt into a bar full of Nebraska fans, they should think I am rooting for the Texas football team and not Nebraska. If I really am rooting for Nebraska, I would be giving a false impression by wearing the Texas shirt. The shirt is like one's church membership. It is an easy way to tell where our loyalties lie—because we cannot see into the heart to find out what people really believe. Closed communion says that only people with our beliefs (the same shirt or membership) should commune with us.

We do not say that those belonging to other churches are not Christian or saved. We welcome all people to hear the preached word and worship

with us. But communion is a special meal that demonstrates and demands complete unity. This is why we wait until children have been taught the Christian faith and confirmed to offer them communion. Unlike the preached Word of God, the Lord's body and blood can also harm one who does not recognize what he receives. "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" (I Corinthians 11:27-29). Out of love we closely guard this precious gift for the sake of others.

How about those who are Lutheran? Why can't all Lutherans commune here? At one time, years ago, those of some other Lutheran synods could commune at an LC-MS church. But the Lord's Supper is about beliefs, for we who are of one loaf partake of one body. Those with the name "Lutheran" do not all believe the same.

Indeed, the biggest Lutheran synod, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), believes radically differently than we do in the Missouri Synod. The most obvious difference is that they mistreat God's Word. The Bible does not permit women to be pastors, for men are to lead God's flock on earth (I Corinthians 14:34-35; I Timothy 2:11-14). Also, the Bible condemns the homosexual lifestyle as sinful (Romans 1:26-27; Leviticus 18:22). But the ELCA has women and practicing homosexuals as pastors—contrary to God's Word. This is against God's will and this is not what we believe in the LC-MS.

The ELCA has also officially declared full fellowship with the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Reformed Church in America, the United Church of Christ, and the United Methodist Church. They have glossed over many doctrinal differences and do not sincerely hold the biblical teachings. Most of those churches the ELCA is in fellowship with do not believe that people receive Christ's body and blood at the altar—the bread and wine (if they use them) are just symbols to them. Also, in 1999 the ELCA came to an agreement with the Roman Catholic church on how we are saved—meaning the disagreements of the Reformation, in the 1600's, no longer matter.

These are serious differences. And even small differences in biblical teaching prevent churches from joining in fellowship together. “Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work” II John 1:9-11. Because doctrinal differences do exist, it would be inappropriate for an LC–MS member and an ELCA member to commune together—in an ELCA or an LC–MS church. Both churches cannot be right—we cannot be on both sides of these issues. Our beliefs are that important, and so is our public confession at the Lord's altar. Communion at a church which does not believe as we do gives a false impression: that we are in full agreement---when we're not.

Fellowship is not about an individual church. It is about who we are officially connected

with by membership. An individual person or church may not believe everything their church body does, yet they are still connected by their membership. If they do not believe like that, then they should not belong. Membership, by definition, says that agreement does exist. So, a member of the LC–MS should not automatically commune at a church he feels comfortable at or where he feels like there is fellowship. Likewise, a member of another church should not commune at our church, without flying the same flag (membership) as us.

Fellowship is declared officially between church bodies, not between individual Christians or churches. It is like the person wearing the wrong shirt. We are happy if they seem to be in agreement with us, but they are still wearing the wrong shirt (belong to the wrong church)—the one that supports beliefs that we don't agree with. We have closed communion because we take the differences between churches earnestly---no point of God's Word is to be taken lightly or compromised on.

We are linked to our church by our membership. We do not commune people on the basis of personal beliefs, because there is no way to tell how a certain individual believes—we cannot see into the heart. We go by the outward flag one waves—their church membership. By allowing someone who waves a different flag (membership) to commune with us, we are saying that we agree with the whole church body that is flying that flag. Because communion shows complete unity in all teachings, we cannot allow those belonging to churches which we are not in fellowship with to commune here. It would be a false and misleading unity at the Lord's altar.

The truth of God's Word and our teaching does

not change. But churches and their teachings sometimes do vary, just as a person might change churches. Therefore, our lines of fellowship must re-align. Right now we are in fellowship with only one other Lutheran church in the U.S., the American Association of Lutheran Churches. However, we are in fellowship with many churches around the world, including the Lutheran Church of Canada, and several churches in each of these regions: Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America. True fellowship and unity is a wonderful blessing to reverently celebrate in Holy Communion. To preserve this true closeness we practice closed communion.

We are not exclusive in the LC–MS. We welcome everyone who is not opposed to godly teaching. But before Holy Communion is offered, we need to make sure that one's personal beliefs are in order and one's outward membership is the way we do that. All are welcome to Holy Communion, but not without complete agreement on all Christian teachings. Therefore, anyone outside of the LC–MS wishing to commune with us is welcome to receive instruction in order to join our church. We do this to follow God's will in love and to preserve the unity which is expressed in the Lord's Holy Supper. Thank you for honoring our wishes and respecting our beliefs. For further explanation please talk to the pastor.

Author:

*Pastor Philip Hale  
St. Paul Lutheran Church  
PO Box 306  
Bancroft NE 68004  
splc.bancroft@gmail.com*