

Why Closed Communion?

Is It Closed or Close?

The first question you might have is, "Why closed Communion?" Many, particularly in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod have heard it called "close Communion." It was explained to them along the lines of a **close** family meal. That is nice sounding, but it has nothing to do with the idea of not letting some people commune at your altar. This practice comes from the early church. There the deacon would declare that all those not in fellowship with their altar should leave. Then he **closed** the door.

A Historic Practice that Still Goes on Today

In the first four centuries of the Church, the rule was this. If you believed it really was the Body and Blood of Christ on your altar, you practiced closed Communion. If you did not believe it was the Body and Blood of Christ really, actually present on your altar, you practiced open Communion, that is, you let people decide for themselves whether or not they should take Communion. An analogy to these practices in life today is found at your pharmacy. The pharmacist keeps under lock and key certain medicines. You cannot have them unless you have a prescription. That is because those medicines are the real deal. If you take them wrongly, if you take them when they are not meant for you, they can harm you or even kill you. Doesn't St. Paul say the same thing about misusing the Holy Communion? "*For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick and a number of you have fallen asleep*" (I Corinthians 11:29-30). A faithful pharmacist keeps his or her real, powerful medicine under lock and key and doesn't distribute it to everyone who wants it. What about sugar pills? Who cares who takes a sugar pill? It can't do anyone any harm and who knows it might do them some good. If you don't believe the Body and Blood of Christ are really in Holy Communion, if the living Lord Jesus doesn't come into contact with anyone, why should you care who takes Communion? But if you believe it's really the Lord Jesus Christ present under the forms of Bread and Wine, that's another matter, isn't it?

But Shouldn't it Be up To Me to Decide if I go to Communion?

"Ah," some of you who know your Bible are saying, "He didn't quote verse 28, the one right before St. Paul's warning about communing wrongly. Verse 28 says, *A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup.*" Yup, that's what it indeed says, but St. Paul wasn't talking about the Methodists visiting the Lutherans, or the Presbyterians, Catholics, or Episcopalians visiting the Lutherans. He was writing to members of his own Church not visitors from different Churches! I *do* say to my members what St. Paul said to his, "Let each of you examine yourselves, and so come to the Lord's Table." I don't say that to visitors and neither did St. Paul.

What Would Open Communion Say to Our Kids and Potential Members?

Say, for a minute, that I were to commune Catholics, Orthodox, or high Anglicans. Lutherans admit that these denominations also have the Real Presence. Or, say I were to commune those who are members of denominations who don't teach that Christ is really present on their altar in the Holy Communion though they themselves believe He is. What I would be saying is that

Why Closed Communion?

visitors to my Church don't need to be instructed in our faith before communing, but our children who have grown up in this Church do need to be instructed before communing. Wouldn't that be nonsense? What point would there be in making people go to instruction classes before joining our Church? If I communed Catholics who pray to Mary, Baptist who don't baptize their babies, Presbyterians who believe Christ only died for some, how could I stop someone from joining our Church who believed these things?

The Difference Between Fellowship and Friendship

There is one critical distinction you must make, the distinction between friendship and fellowship. Fellowship is not between individuals but altars. Fellowship is not between my heart and your heart but between your altar and my altar. Friendship is about you liking me and me liking you. Fellowship is about whether or not we believe, teach, and confess the same things.

We Take Your Confession of Faith Seriously

Since I can't look into your heart to see what you really believe, I can only go by the confession you make with your mouth. When you say, "I'm a Presbyterian," or, "I go to St. Mary's Catholic Church," you are making a confession of faith. Lutherans and Presbyterians, Lutherans and Catholics, Lutherans and whatever denomination, do not believe, teach, or confess the same things. We can't pretend we do. To go to the same altar together says one of two things: Either A) neither of us take our confession seriously. Or B) we've agreed to disagree. If a person believes his or her doctrine is in agreement with the Word of God, does he or she ever have a right not to take it seriously or to agree to disagree? If you believe that your doctrine is in agreement with the Word of God, where does God give you permission to set it aside or to join it with a contrary teaching?

But What if I'm a Member of the ELCA?

"What about me? I'm a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. I commune at Missouri Synod Churches all the time." I believe you do, and that is sad. The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod has never at any time been in fellowship with the ELCA. The ELCA was formed when the Lutheran Church in America, the American Lutheran Church, and The American Evangelical Lutheran Church merged in 1988. For a short time the LCMS was in fellowship with the ALC, but in 1983 the LCMS broke fellowship with the ALC citing serious doctrinal differences. These doctrinal differences persist and have grown worse in the ELCA. By 1998 the ELCA entered into full fellowship with the Reformed Church in America, the United Church of Christ, and the Episcopal Church. The first two have never wanted anything to do with the Body and Blood of Christ really being present on their altar. Furthermore, the ELCA as a church body publicly supports abortion, homosexuality, and women pastors. If you don't believe me, just read the books they publish.

Because you won't commune me does that mean you think I'm going to hell?

Of course not. I don't commune some of my own children, and I don't think they are going to hell. I regard all who belong to the Holy Christian Church by faith in Jesus Christ as saved, forgiven, and part of the Body of Christ. When I don't commune you, I am saying one of two things. Either a) you have not been instructed in the Lutheran Faith or b) you belong to an altar that believes, teaches and confesses contrary to the faith believed, taught, and confessed at our altar.

Christian Men and Women Can Disagree Without Sending Each Other To Hell

I have found that those who take their confession of faith seriously do not want to commune at an altar that stands for something they don't believe in. If you are not sure what you believe, if you are not sure whether your conscience is being governed only by God's Word, then you should study these things. Compare what your Church teaches with what the Bible says. Compare what we teach with what the Bible says. Join the one that agrees with what the Bible says.

Okay, so prove to me your practice of closed Communion is found in the Bible?

Good question. I could argue from the fact that when Jesus instituted this Meal He only invited those whom He had instructed during the previous 3 years. He didn't even invite His own mother! I could argue from Romans 16 where St. Paul lists those house churches with whom He is in fellowship. I could argue that the Bible commands Christians to separate from those who hold to teaching that are contrary to what the Bible teaches, and St. Paul warned not about BIG doctrinal errors but the small ones saying in I Corinthians 5:6, "*Don't you know a little yeast ferments the whole dough.*"

Here are some other Bible passages for you to consider:

Romans 16:17, "*I urge you fellow Christians to watch those who cause disagreements and make people fall by going against the teaching you learned. Turn away from them.*"

II Thessalonians 3:15, "*If anyone will not listen to what we say in this letter, mark him, and don't have anything to do with him, so he will feel ashamed. Don't treat him like an enemy, but warn him like a brother.*"

Titus 3:10,11, "*A man who chooses to be different in his teachings warn once, and a second time, and then don't have anything more to do with him because you know such a man condemns himself.*"

II John 9-11, "*Anyone who goes too far and doesn't stay with what Christ has taught doesn't have God. If you stay with what He taught, you have the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and doesn't teach this, don't take him into your home or greet him. If you greet him, you share the wicked things he does.*"

Matthew 7:15, "*Beware of false prophets. They come to you dressed like sheep, but in their hearts they're greedy wolves.*"

I John 4:1, "*Dear friends don't believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see if they are from God. Many false prophets have gone out into the world.*"

Rev. Paul Harris
Trinity Lutheran Church
Austin, Texas