

Close Communion

At St. Paul's, we practice "close communion." This term indicates that those who participate in the Lord's Supper are closely united by a common faith and understanding of the teachings of Scripture. **We follow the practice of close Communion out of love for both our members and our visitors.**

When a person comes to communion at a church, there are two unions that are celebrated. The first is between that individual and God. The second is a union with all those at the table with them. When you commune at a church, you are publicly declaring that you believe everything this church teaches. The Apostle Paul explains this in **1 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."** Christians who share in the Lord's Supper are called "one body." By receiving the Supper together, we are making a statement about the unity of faith that we share.

The question is, "How much unity should Christians who receive the Lord's Supper together share?" Is it only necessary to agree that Jesus is the Son of God and our Savior? Or is the unity that the Bible has in mind stronger than that? In **Matthew 28:19-20** Jesus said, **"Go and make disciples of all nations...teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."** And in **1 Corinthians 1:10** Paul supports that notion: **"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."**

These verses, along with many other Scripture passages, show us that Christians are to seek a complete and total unity of faith. Our Lord wants believers who confess a true oneness of faith to gather, work, worship and commune together. It is a sad consequence of the divisions in Christianity that inter-communion between us and other Christians is not legitimate. Reception of the Lord's Supper by Christians not fully united with us would imply a oneness that does not exist, but for which we all should strive and pray.

We do not want to put anyone in the position of confessing to agree with what our church teaches before they've had the opportunity to learn what our church teaches. Therefore, for the sake of clear and consistent confession, we ask our visitors to not join us in the Lord's Supper until after that instruction can take place.

The Bible also gives us a second reason why we practice close communion:

When Jesus gave his disciples the Holy Communion: **"Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, 'Take and eat; this is my body.' Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins'" (Matthew 26:26-28).**

God attaches a warning to improperly receiving Jesus' body and blood in **1 Corinthians 11:27, 29**: **"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....For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself."**

When Christians receive the Lord's Supper together as Jesus directed, they receive the very body and blood of Jesus in a miraculous way. However, the Bible warns that those who fail to recognize Jesus' body and blood in the Lord's Supper are participating to their spiritual harm, rather than benefit. Because many churches do not acknowledge the real presence of Jesus' body and blood together with the bread and wine, we are careful about those whom we invite to Holy Communion. We want to be certain that those who come forward truly understand what is received in the Lord's Supper, lest they hurt themselves rather than receive the blessings God offers here.

Participation

If you are a member of a congregation in the WELS (Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod) or the ELS (Evangelical Lutheran Synod), your membership in one of our sister congregations indicates that you are in full agreement with what we believe and teach here at St. Paul's. You are welcome to participate in the Lord's Supper with us. However, please speak to our pastor or an usher prior to the service to let them know that you would like to join us

for communion.

If you are a member of a congregation from another Lutheran church, such as the LC-MS (Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod) or the ELCA (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America), we ask that you speak with our pastor first before joining us for the Lord's Supper. While we cannot judge the heart, membership in one of these church bodies indicates that there is at least some variation in faith and not the complete unity God demands to participate in the Lord's Supper together. We will want to sit down and study God's Word together before we join in the Lord's Supper together.

If you are a member of another Christian denomination, or you are not presently affiliated with a Christian church, we ask that you first attend our Bible Information Class. This course will provide you the opportunity to learn more about what we believe and teach, based on the Bible. If you find that you agree with what is taught here at St. Paul's, you are invited to join our membership and participate in Holy Communion upon completion of the course.

Other Questions

Q: Why haven't I heard of "close communion" before?

A: Close communion is not something new to the Christian church. Jesus and his apostles directed the early church to practice it. Martin Luther and the early Lutheran Church practiced it. In fact, most Christian denominations practiced close communion until the past few decades. The Word of God has not changed. Unfortunately, many have become lax in following it in this regard.

Q: Won't people wonder if I don't commune?

A: The members of our church understand that there are valid reasons not to commune, especially if you are a visitor. Never commune out of fear or pressure of what others will think! Ask if it is right according to God's Word.

Q: Should I feel left out?

A: No! The Lord's forgiveness announced throughout the service and sermon is still yours even if you do not commune. He has not forgotten you. Full participation in the Lord's Supper is a privilege that is more meaningful when it comes at the proper time and with the Lord's blessing. While others are receiving Communion, we encourage you to stay and observe, sing the hymns, mediate, and pray.