

“Presenting Close(d) Communion and the Divine Service”

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“Our Lord is the Lord who serves. Jesus Christ came into the flesh not to be served, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many” (LSB, viii). Thus begins the new Lutheran Service Book introduction. How does Christ serve us? “Our Lord serves us today through His holy Word and Sacraments” (LSB viii). Our Lord serves us for our eternal benefit, bringing all He has done for us to us, using special means. Pastors are called by Christ through His church to be the public servants of these means for the benefit of His people. Thus, as they preach and teach and administer the sacraments, pastors serve Christ’s people in His stead and by His authority. The church, gathered together in various places, has been thus served since the beginning (Acts 2:42, Eph. 4:11, 1 Cor. 4:1).

The role of the pastor serving in the worship service is clear. He is to preach and teach Christ (1 Cor. 2:2; 1 Tim. 4:13). The Lutheran Confessions consistently say that worship is to teach the people what they need to know about Christ (AC 24, 3). The worship service is the delivery point at which God serves His people by offering Himself to them in His Word and Sacraments. Christ comes to His people, offering His body and blood, only after they have been properly instructed and examined (1 Cor. 11:27-29).

The practice of closed Communion as a biblical practice has been the norm since the very beginning of the sacrament. “The strict limitation of participation is clearly evident at the end of the apostolic age.”ⁱ Further, Lutheran theology at the reformation also declared that “none are admitted except they first be examined” (AC XXIV 6; cf AP 1, VIII, 40). Closed Communion has been repeatedly addressed by our Synod. For example, in the document written in response to the request of Synod in convention, we find “two specific issues that relate to admission to the Eucharist: pastoral oversight and doctrinal unity among those who commune.”ⁱⁱ The same CTCR document summarizes with this conclusion: “Unity in apostolic doctrine is appropriate and necessary among those who commune together at the Lord’s Supper.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Unity at the altar is what closed Communion is about. It’s a unity with one another, because of our unity with Christ. The fellowship that Christians enjoy at the Table of the Lord is unlike any other in the world. It literally joins us together with Jesus Christ himself. “What links those who partake of the Lord’s Supper is not that they have something to do with one another, their human relationship with each other, but that which they share together.”^{iv} That which we share, which links us together, is Jesus Christ.

An Ancient Practice

As people of God in Christ, we confess Christ together. A man can hold only one confession. Jesus taught: “Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand” (Mt 12:25 ESV). The confession of the house of worship in which one “stands” is also the confession of the person standing there. How can a person one Sunday stand for one doctrine and then the next Sunday stand for one which is contrary to the first? Werner Elert put it this way:

To the early church a man was orthodox or heterodox according to his confession. He was the one or the other according to that confession with which he was “in fellowship.” The fellowship in which he stood, the church to which he belonged, was shown by *where he received* the sacrament. [Italics added]

Since a man cannot at the same time hold two different confessions, he cannot communicate (commune) in two churches of differing confessions. If anyone does this nevertheless, he denies his own confession or has none at all.^v

In the 20th century, in his work, “Church and Lord’s Supper,” German/Australian Lutheran theologian Hermann Sasse, makes several observations which reflect and uphold earlier orthodoxy. He had already reflected on the church’s bankruptcy of liberal theology of his day saying, “one could live with it, but one could not die with it.”^{vi} As much as human beings may try to make the church something which *they* accomplish, the truth is always this: “The sole factor that causes the church to be the church: the presence of Christ alone.”^{vii} It is his body, and he establishes it and feeds it. In fact, in the Lord’s Supper, “she becomes visible as church in a totally unique way.”^{viii}

Until Christ’s return, the Holy Christian Church is invisible. Yet, it will remain forever. Now, it is visible wherever the Gospel is purely taught and the Sacraments are correctly administered” (AC 7, 1). The body of Christ is One throughout all generations. Sasse reminds us, “as there is only one Christ, there is only one church . . . only one Table of the Lord, at which we all partake of the one bread and thereby have the fellowship of the body of Christ. From this it follows that church fellowship is altar fellowship . . . and . . . altar fellowship is only possible where a real church fellowship already exists.”^{ix}

Much more could be said systematically about the practice of closed Communion. For example: “Individuals who attend the sacrament are not only ‘individuals’ but also ‘confessors’ of the doctrine of their own church body.”^x Writes Elert, “The Eucharist makes us bodily one, it unites all with Christ but also with one another.” He also points out that, “the fellowship of the communicants with one another is constituted not by the will of man, nor the common ‘faith in the heart,’ but by the body of Christ; that he who eats the one bread eats the body of Christ.”^{xi} These, and many other points that could be listed on this subject, show that closed Communion is the right practice of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.^{xii}

A Difficult Time to Practice

As important as the Biblical practice of closed Communion is, it has never been more difficult to attempt to do what the title of this article suggests than today. At the same time, it has never been more important to do so. We live in an age of individualism more than at any other time. Even though the tragedy of September 11, 2001 brought a brief and shallow kind of unity of mind and spirit on a national level, beneath it all continues to live a deep-seated mind-set of self-centeredness. This is, of course, nothing new. Our pride has been and will remain man’s first and most important problem. This is seen in both modernism and postmodernism. Modernism held the ability of the human mind as the final authority in determining that which is true and real. Even though we may not agree with the outcome of their study of the Scriptures, at least they considered the Scriptures to have some truth in them (somewhere). The postmodern generation does not

start with the belief that truth can be found if we look hard enough. It begins with the position that truth is certainly not absolute.

This cultural phenomenon called “postmodernism” is all around us, and every pastor has surely encountered it many times. But it is especially serious when he encounters it in the face of his catechesis: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn 14:6 ESV). Quite commonly, the simple response is, “That may be true for you, but not for me. I wish to come to the Lord’s Supper. It’s *my* decision, not yours!” How in the world does the pastor deal with *this* kind of thinking? It looks impossible. In fact, it is. It is just as impossible now as it was with Adam and Eve in the first place. Man’s sin is inescapable and fatal, and only God can, and, in fact, *has*, dealt with it. The good news of the Gospel is that he has, in the person of Jesus Christ.

Notice that it has been stated very carefully that God has dealt with our problem of sin and separation from him in the *person* of Jesus Christ. This is our first or primary source of our theology. It will not do only to talk *about* the Bible and its authority, or argue in favor of the historical claims of Christianity in sharing our faith. We share Christ when we actually share Christ’s words and Sacraments. It is the *person* of Jesus Christ that encounters individuals in his Word and Sacraments. There it is that minds are changed (made alive, converted) and men are given the mind of God in his Son. This is best shared in a catechetical program that is centered in the life of the church. If Christianity is shared outside these means of grace, there is a danger “that theology becomes intellectualized, centered in the academy, and divorced from the life of the Church.”^{xiii}

Preaching and teaching about the real presence of Christ is nothing new. But the way that the pastor approaches this wonderful task is an on-going challenge. The temptation is always to turn away from the truth of Christ’s real presence in his Word and Sacraments, and try something new, something that fits today’s culture. Christ’s presence in the preached Word and Sacraments seem rather weak compared to the buzz and beat of the culture around us. Furthermore, today’s politically correct movement tries to be all-inclusive, and the Table of the Lord requires careful pastoral care and instruction, which goes directly against this cultural movement.

The idea that Jesus does all the work in serving us at the Lord’s Table is foreign to many today. Religion is seen as something *we* do, not the work of a serving Lord. Jesus said to his disciples, “I am among you as the one who serves” (Lk 22:27)—and serve us he does, especially in the Divine Service! Of course, “the Lord’s service calls forth our service—in sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to Him and in loving service to one another” (LSB viii). But even this, our response, is enabled only by the means of grace first given us by Christ’s service. Here, he continues to forgive sins, just as he did while walking on earth. Here, Jesus still serves those whom he has brought into his kingdom through Holy Baptism. This is the essence of the Pastoral office as well. “The kingdom is present whenever and wherever the King is present.”^{xiv} The very idea that Christ is present in his Sacraments is radical and impossible to completely comprehend and is thus rejected by many today. They simply do not believe that salvation and Christ’s kingdom is found in Christ, who comes to us, and not in their own mind and reasoning, by our coming to him. Thus, to many today, “infant baptism is senseless, and nothing more than a ‘sprinkling,’ and adult baptism has become something done by man in obedience to

God, as fulfilling a law, not experiencing a mysterious union with Christ. Further, Christ is not present in His Supper, and certainly not in His body and blood!”^{xv}

Presenting the Practice...

Therefore, how does a pastor today present closed Communion in a positive way? The answer is found in proper catechesis. This catechesis occurs primarily in the Divine Service, where the holy presence of Christ in his Word and Sacraments are properly celebrated as his victorious kingdom, which has broken in among us. The kingdom of Christ is One in the person of Christ. Pastors have a very important and wonderful opportunity to share this good news of Christ’s meal of forgiveness in a holy and positive way. They can preach, and teach (catechize) the real presence of Christ in his Word and Sacraments, and handle the holy elements of the Eucharist with reverence and awe. In doing so, pastors will be inviting the people with their words and actions to participate in the holy kingdom of Christ.

While the pastor recognizes that his duty to the visitor is to share both the Law of God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ, he also is called upon to preside over the Lord’s table. In doing so, he will invite the visitor to consider the mysteries of God as found in the Scriptures. He will guide the inquirer into the mysterious “unity we share in the Church by baptism into Christ and the ongoing expression of that unity among those who confess the catholic faith and Christ’s bodily presence in, with and under the bread and wine.”^{xvi}

This process of catechesis is important for people who are searching for a church with an order that centers on Christ and him crucified, although it may not be immediately apparent to such seekers that this is what they actually need. A California trial lawyer, Craig Parton, writes about his journey trying to find a church this way:

“The last thing on my mind after becoming a Christian in 1974 was ending up in the Lutheran (a.k.a “dead”) church. Lutherans, in my view, needed conversion. They didn’t *have* the Gospel—they *needed* the Gospel. . . . What is odd is that I landed where escapees do not generally flock to—the conservative Lutheran Reformation.

At the pure stream of the Lutheran Reformation, I found the Gospel *at the center* once again—not just a polite mention of it. . . . I found a church where my children were instructed to get on their knees and confess their sins rather than shout, clap, and giggle. . . . I found reverence and a God I could again fear as well as love and trust. I found a link to the historic and universal (i.e., catholic) worship to the church. . . . But most important, I found Christ crucified as the center and substance of Lutheran worship. I found a doctrine of the Christian life that flowed out of the forgiveness of sins and that let God do the saving and the sanctifying from start to finish.”^{xvii}

Parton’s encounter with Jesus Christ in the historic, orthodox Lutheran order of the Divine Service changed his whole view of what worship is. He learned how Christ’s Gospel and His Supper served his whole family, and this then drew him into the Lutheran church. Writes Parton,

“Nothing helped more to remind us of our unity as Christians than receiving Christ’s body and blood together in the Sacrament. There, together on our knees at the altar, we are united with the larger communion of saints—“angels and archangels and all the

company of heaven” as well as all those Christians living today who confess the one true faith. We receive a Savior who ever lives to intercede for us and for our family. Our faith in Christ is increased. Communion now is the highlight of the service for all of us. . . . We came to love the stability of a Christ-centered and thus Gospel-centered order of service.”^{xviii}

Quoting Hermann Sasse, Parton observes about his family’s reasoning on why they remain members of a congregation which practices closed Communion and uses the order of the Divine Service on Sundays: “We are faithful to this church, not because it is the church of our Fathers, but because it is the church of the Gospel; not because it is the church of Luther, but because it is the church of Jesus Christ.”^{xix} It should be noted here, that the orders of the Divine Service (in LSB, LW, TLH), which the pastor is called to lead are to be conducted reverently, respectfully, with proper decorum. Parton is not describing a Divine Service poorly done.

Another “seeking,” now Lutheran writer, Gene Veith, writes in a similar way about his awareness’s in contrasting the informal evangelical worship service with an historic, orthodox Lutheran service:

“After worshiping in that church for many months, I realized what was different about it. I was experiencing what I had never really known before, a sense of holiness. The robes, the rituals, the art, the music served to “set apart” what was happening from ordinary life. . . . Church . . . was a place where something sacred could be found. The way the pastor would bow to the cross and to the Word of God on the altar, the way the congregation would rise and kneel, the majestic language of the liturgy convinced me that something different, something extraordinary is going on here.

And when the service culminated in Holy Communion the mystery of holiness became palpable. My wife and I knew we were not allowed to take Communion—we could not receive Christ’s body until we had been thoroughly instructed, accepted into the fellowship, and knew what we were doing. Though all of the other churches we had attended, considering the sacrament not quite such a big deal, were free and easy about who could take Communion, I was not put off by the Lutherans’ closed Communion practices and strict fellowship rules. Such practices were alien to my experience, but they added to the sense that something monumental was happening with the Sacrament.”^{xx}

Veith observes that “Lutheran worship is God-centered, not human-centered. I find Lutheran liturgical worship to be extraordinarily moving. . . . We found the services—*and the depth of the preaching* and the richness of the doctrines. . . . so compelling that we decided to join”^{xxi} (italics added). In sharing the unique confession of the Lutheran church’s historic, orthodox practice of closed Communion, the pastor can “affirm that the core value of Lutheranism is Christ’s presence among us that marks us as holy, and that this presence in baptism, preaching, and Eucharist is an eschatological one.”^{xxii} This sharing, this conviction, will make a difference in the way the pastor leads the service, and the way the congregation and visitors will receive it. Using the Divine Service of LSB, LW, and TLH, are certainly not the only ways our congregations can present Christ’s Gospel and Sacraments. The pastor who seeks to use or develop alternate orders has that freedom in the Gospel. However, he is to use this freedom with responsibility

and is encouraged to “[use] resources such as *Text, Music, Context. A Resource for Reviewing Worship Materials to Assist Worship Materials.*”^{xxiii}

What a joyful opportunity the pastor has to invite people into this union with Christ. What a privilege to be able to bring Christ in this way to those who do not know of his wonderful presence. What an honor to share the Holy Supper in such a way!

...as Gospel Proclamation

With this kind of theological thinking and practice, the pastor will be ready for the question asked by the visitor, “Pastor, may I commune today?” He will be ready for the question, both theologically and practically. He will have, in the printed materials, information that will briefly and clearly explain the historic Lutheran practice of closed Communion. They should end with an invitation for instruction/catechesis about the Sacrament, so that as the people read, they it will in some part realize the majesty and importance of the Lord’s Supper in this place, as well as feel that they are invited to participate soon with the people gathered together in Christ’s presence. The pastor’s tone when addressing the individual or the entire assembly will be inviting and not condemning in any way, because the Lord’s Supper is pure Gospel and not Law. It is of course impossible in a written form to give this example here, but the point here to be “heard” is that the pastor should be quite aware of his tone of voice and body posture and even facial expressions (smile) as he makes this Communion announcement. He is seeking to be inviting to those who may soon be inquiring about the Lord’s Supper in his catechesis class.

An example may be helpful here. When a non-Lutheran visitor asks me if they may attend the Sacrament, I may have replied a few years ago, “No, I’m sorry, you may not attend, you are not a Lutheran.” Notice that the first word out of my mouth was “No.” That is not a Gospel word! Today, when asked by a non-Lutheran, or someone of a denomination not in confessional union with our church body, I reply: “We would love to have you attend! Let’s set up a time to offer you some instruction about this wonderful sacrament, and make it happen soon.” Notice that I am practicing closed Communion in a positive, inviting manner.

As another example in practicing closed Communion in a positive way, the announcement in the bulletin might say something that reflects the verbal answer above. After listing the historic and orthodox practice of closed Communion, the announcement concludes with these words:

“However, we *do* want you to come to the Lord’s Supper. The pastor sincerely invites you to visit with him about the joys of Holy Communion. He will offer you instruction about our Lutheran faith and this Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, so you will be ready to stand with us and partake of this wonderful meal.”^{xxiv}

The experience of this writer has been very encouraging as I have used this positive approach in practicing closed Communion. Many have been welcomed into the family of God and as members of the assembly of saints gathered around the Word and Sacrament in the local parish. What a joyful opportunity for the pastor to be able share the blessed reality of Christ’s true presence in his church through the means of Grace: the preached and taught Word and Sacraments!

End Notes

- i. Elert, Werner. *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*, trans. N. E. Nagel (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966), 77. (See chapter seven “Closed Communion” for a fuller review of the early church’s practices and understanding of the scriptures regarding this topic.)
- ii. “Admission to the Lord’s Supper—Basics of Biblical and Confessional Teaching,” Commission of Theology and Church Relations [CTCR], (November 1999), 5. Used by permission. (The reader is encouraged to refer to the Biblical and Confessional support cited in this document, as space does not permit a fuller review here.)
- iii. CTCR (November 1999), 30.
- iv. Elert, “*Eucharist and Church Fellowship*”, 4.
- v. Elert, 182.
- vi. Hermann Sasse, *We Confess Jesus Christ*, trans. Norman Nagel (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1984), 100.
- vii. Sasse, *The Lonely Way*, “Church and Lord’s Supper: An Essay on the Understanding of the Sacrament of the Altar”(1938), trans. Matthew C. Harrison (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2001), 376
- viii. Sasse, *The Lonely Way*, “Church and Lord’s Supper: An Essay on the Understanding of the Sacrament of the Altar”(1938), trans. Matthew C. Harrison (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2001), 378.
- ix. Sasse, *The Lonely Way (Vol. 1)*, “Theses on the Question of Church and Altar Fellowship,”(1937) trans. Matthew C. Harrison (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2001), 332.
- x. “The Nature and Implications of the Concept of Fellowship,” *Commission on Theology and Church Relations*, (April 1981), 30. Used by permission.
- xi. Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship*, 39.
- xii. For a longer review on this topic one could read, “*Closed Communion as a Gospel Practice*,” my dissertation for DMin at Concordia Theological Seminary, May, 2004.
- xiii. Just, Arthur A., Jr., “Sacramental Practice in a Post-Denominational America” *Shepherd of the Church: Essays in Pastoral Theology Honoring Bishop Roger D. Pittelko*. (Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 2001), 117. Used by permission.
- xiv. Just, Arthur A., Jr., “Eating and Drinking at His Table” *Mysteria Dei, Essays in Honor of Kurt Marquart*” (Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 2000), 125. Used by permission.
- xv. These are summary statements that are intended to reflect what I have experienced in my campus setting visiting with reformed thinkers.
- xvi. Just, “Sacramental Practice in a Post-Denominational America”, 125.
- xvii. Parton, Craig A. *The Defense Never Rests, A Lawyer’s Quest for the Gospel* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2003), 10-11.
- xviii. Parton, 41.
- xix. Parton, 119.
- xx. Veith, Gene Edward, Jr. *The Spirituality of the Cross: The Way of the First Evangelicals* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2003), 109.
- xxi. Veith, 109.
- xxii. Just, “Sacramental Practice in a Post-Denominational America”, 125.
- xxiii. 2004 Convention Proceedings; Resolution 2-04 “To Affirm Responsible Use of Freedom in Worship”
- xxiv. From the bulletin at Wittenberg Lutheran Chapel, Grand Forks, North Dakota. Used by permission.