# WHY DO WE PRACTICE CLOSE(D) COMMUNION?

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## *St. Matthew Lutheran Church*

*A member congregation of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod*

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Every week, the Sacrament of the Altar, also known as the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion, is celebrated at St. Matthew Lutheran Church. Through the years, the practice of celebrating the Sacrament of the Altar has varied quite a bit from church to church. The group of congregations known as The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has publicly declared that we strive to follow the Scriptural teachings of the Sacrament of the Altar as closely as possible. This is in keeping with our mutual definition of "church" according to the Lutheran Confessions:

*The Church exists where the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel [Augsburg Confession VII]*[1]

When it comes to the Sacrament of the Altar, there are four points that are important to understand about our practice of administering the Sacrament.

### 1. CONCERN, NOT JUDGMENT

It is not our intention to offend anyone. Ours is a concern for administering Holy Communion that preserves and upholds the truth of Holy Scripture. It is our hope that our beliefs will be respected by those who differ from us. In not inviting others of different beliefs or confessions we are not making a judgment about the existence of saving faith in them. We simply desire that all of God's people cling to his sure and certain Word in all its fullness and so receive the blessings that he bestows with the body and blood given and shed for the forgiveness of our sins.

### 2. THE REAL PRESENCE

According to the words of Jesus recorded in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, and the epistle 1 Corinthians, the bread and wine used in Holy Communion, when consecrated by the Words of Institution, include the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Sometimes called the "Sacramental Union," we have commonly described this as the body and blood of Jesus "in, with, and under" the bread and the wine.

This is a different understanding of the Real Presence as it is understood by the Roman Catholic Church. Their official doctrine is that the bread and wine disappear altogether and only the body and blood of Jesus are present. This is also a different understanding of the Real Presence, as it is understood by churches of the Reformed tradition (Presbyterian Church USA, Reformed Church in America, etc.). The Reformed Churches' official doctrine is that Holy Communion is a memorial meal and that the body and blood of Jesus are not present, merely bread and wine.

Jesus clearly states that the bread *is* his body and that the wine *is* his blood. St. Paul would further clarify that by writing: *Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. [1 Corinthians 11:27-30 ESV]*

### 3. UNITY OF DOCTRINE

Because of the seriousness of profaning the body and blood of Jesus, the Christian Church from the very beginning believed that those who come to Holy Communion should know what they are doing. A unity of faith became the norm from early on, as evidenced from Acts 2:42 which tells us:

*And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*

The "breaking of bread" was another way of saying "Holy Communion." Those who partook of the Sacrament confessed publicly that they all believed the same thing and that their belief was based on the Holy Scriptures ("the apostles' teaching").

The practice of Closed Communion ensures, as much as it is humanly possible, that all those who come to the Sacrament of the Altar publicly confess all that is believed, taught and confessed at that congregation. This is not limited to our belief of what the Lord's Supper is, but also the other beliefs of the church such as prayer, the pastoral ministry, stewardship, evangelism, creation, and all the other teachings of Holy Scripture. [2]

### 4. CONFESSION OF FAITH

The Sacrament of the Altar is a public confession of faith. This is evident from what St. Paul writes:

*For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. [1 Corinthians 11:26 ESV]*

To "*proclaim the Lord's death*" is to proclaim: that Christ died for us, that he did this because we are sinful, that he rose again on the third day, that he will come again, etc. All these teachings come from the Holy Scriptures. We are not at liberty to pick and choose which part of Scripture we want to believe. So, if we believe, teach, and confess these things about Jesus, and they are found in Holy Scripture, then we believe, teach and confess *all* of Holy Scripture.

Because of this, we must be careful where we commune. For example, we wouldn't want to take Holy Communion at a church that doesn't believe what the Bible says about homosexuality, creation, the Holy Trinity, the pastoral ministry, etc. Nor would we want to put people who have a different belief than we do about these or other teachings in a position where they make a public confession that they agree with them when, in fact, they do not.

### IN PREPARATION TO RECEIVE THE LORD'S SUPPER

- ✢ I confess I am a sinner and truly repent, believing that Jesus Christ is my only Savior from all sin, eternal death and Satan.
- ✢ I believe that the true body and blood of the Risen Christ are actually present in the Lord's Supper and "hidden" under the bread and I receive them.
- ✢ I believe that in the Lord's Supper my faith will be strengthened.
- ✢ By the power of the Spirit of the Lord my God I will seek to amend my sinful life.

### FOR FURTHER STUDY

The following books will further explain the practice of Closed Communion:

Martin Chemnitz, *The Lord's Supper*, J.A.O. Preus, trans., St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1979.

Werner Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*, Norman Nagel, trans. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966.

Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics, Vol III* (esp. "The Lord's Supper, pp. 290-393) St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953.

Herman Sasse, *This Is My Body*, Adelaide, S.A., Australia: Lutheran Publishing House, 1977.

Herman Sasse, *We Confess the Sacraments*, Normal Nagel, trans., St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1985.

*Parts of this document have been taken from those written by other LC-MS pastors: Pastors Rick R. Milas, Paul J. Grime, John T. Pless, Bradford E. Scott, Stanley Harding, Paul T. McCain, and David C. Fleming. We thank the Lord for their service to His Church.*

**FOOTNOTES**

1. For Confessional Lutherans, confessional fellowship is agreement "in doctrine and all its articles and... concerning the right use of the Holy Sacraments." (*Formula of Concord,* Solid Declaration, Article X, paragraph 31.) This was also the Church's practice since its earliest days. As Werner Elert observes: "Interconfessional relations are nowadays sometimes so arranged that... where church fellowship is incomplete the laity may mutually receive the Sacrament but the clergy may not mutually celebrate it. Such graduations and distinctions in church fellowship have absolutely no connection with the regulations of the early church... In every case established church fellowship was the indispensable condition of any such reception. Either there was or there was not fellowship between two churches or two bishops, which practically amounted to the same thing. If there was, then laity and clergy of one might receive and celebrate the Sacrament in the other, if no, neither was possible.... There was either complete fellowship or none at all. When the laity are granted the right to receive the Sacrament and the clergy to celebrate it in another church, we have the implementation of the {communion of sacred things}. This takes place only in full church fellowship, of which agreement in doctrine and unity in confession is the basis and condition." (*Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries,* translated by Norman Nagel, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966, pages 164-65.)

The lack of confessional fellowship is why we do not have altar fellowship with, for example, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). We do not invite ELCA members to commune at our altar nor do we commune at ELCA altars because we believe the ELCA allows the teaching and endorses the practice of false doctrine. Some of these false doctrines are the approval of abortion (beyond cases where the mother's life is in danger), the ordination of women as pastors, the failure to reject false teaching (allowing the denial of the *physical* resurrection of Christ and the denial of the inerrancy of Holy Scripture), as well as other anti-Scriptural teachings. St. Paul urges us to separate publicly from those who continue to teach falsely: "I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. "(Romans 16:17).

2. So that publicly we give clear confession to everything that Christ has commanded, we commune only at churches that are in confessional fellowship with us. (This is sometimes called "altar and pulpit fellowship.") Since in the United States today our congregation is only in confessional fellowship with the congregations of The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod (LC-MS) that means in practice we will commune only at LC-MS altars.