THE BIBLICAL PRACTICE OF CLOSED COMMUNION IN THE LIGHT OF 1 CORINTHIANS 11:17-34

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Part 1: Paul's Teaching Regarding The Real Presence and Worthy Reception

Briefly stated, closed communion[1] means that the sacrament must not be given to the impenitent, the unforgiving, the heterodox[2], and those who are unable to examine themselves, such as infants, the unconscious, and those improperly instructed. Since Holy Communion is a means of grace to be received by faith after proper self-examination, and, subordinately, a testimony to the unity of faith and confession, giving the sacrament to the above mentioned persons would violate the purpose of the sacrament. Additionally, since unworthy recipients receive the body and blood of Christ to their judgment, it is an act of Christian love, and of responsible stewardship of the mysteries of God, to deny the sacrament to those not able to make proper use of it (1 Cor. 4:1).

This practice of closed communion has been the universal practice of the church[3] from the days of the apostles through the Reformation[4] up to the time when unionism reared its head. In the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, closed communion was the universal practice until around world war two. Since that time the practice has been gradually disintegrating, and in some parts of the synod, has nearly fallen into disuse. In recent years there has been a growing movement to restore or reintroduce the practice of closed communion to its rightful place. This movement has not proceeded without some considerable opposition throughout the synod, and there is at present a good deal of division among us regarding this question. This division will not be overcome by ignoring the issue and hoping it will go away. It can only be overcome by talking about closed communion in the light of the Word of God and our Lutheran Confessions, and by a willingness to submit to God's truth regardless of the consequences.

It is my purpose here to contribute to this discussion by examining 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 and drawing out its implications for faithful stewardship of the sacrament of the altar. I hope to show that closed communion is the biblical practice, and that it is necessitated by Paul's discussion of the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the sacrament and the implications of this teaching for unworthy and worthy reception, self examination, and discerning the Lord's body. I also hope to demonstrate that closed communion is further necessitated by the secondary purpose of the sacrament as a testimony to the unity of faith and confession in the light of Paul's words about the sacrament being a proclamation and a remembrance.

The Corinthian Situation

The congregation at Corinth was deeply troubled. A careful reading of 1 and 2 Corinthians reveals a congregation riddled with problems that needed correcting. There were divisions and

arguments; carnal strife and a party spirit. Many members were overly impressed with the human wisdom of the philosophers. There was a sizable group who held an arrogant attitude toward Paul and his apostleship. Gross sexual immorality was tolerated, and there was confusion about marriage and divorce. Christians were dragging Christians into court before the unbelieving world and bringing disrepute upon the church. The worship of the congregation had given way to charismatic excesses, and there were people claiming that there is no resurrection from the dead. While the Corinthian congregation was still a Christian congregation, it was a sick congregation in need of healing. Through Paul, the Lord applied His Word to the various situations in the congregation in order to bring about repentance and faith, and to restore the congregation to spiritual and doctrinal health.

In the 11th chapter of 1 Corinthians, Paul addresses a most serious situation: many in the congregation had begun to view the Lord's Supper as a common meal or feast. Not discerning the Lord's body in the sacrament, they were eating and drinking serious judgment upon themselves. This misuse of the sacrament produced the further result of increasing the schisms and heresies already present.

> *1 Corinthians 11:17-22 Now in giving these instructions I do not praise you, since you come together not for the better but for the worse. 18 For first of all, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you, and in part I believe it. 19 For there must also be factions among you, that those who are approved may be recognized among you. 20 Therefore when you come together in one place, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper. 21 For in eating, each one takes his own supper ahead of others; and one is hungry and another is drunk. 22 What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you in this? I do not praise you.*

In introducing the subject matter of proper use of the Lord's Supper, Paul makes the statement that the Corinthians "come together not for the better but for the worse". Their abuse of the sacrament was serious and had dire negative consequences.

> *1 Corinthians 11:30 For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep.*

> *1 Corinthians 11:34 But if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home,* ***lest you come together for judgment.*** *And the rest I will set in order when I come.*

Great harm was being wrought by their coming together at the Lord's table; the abuses of the sacrament were temporally and spiritually detrimental to the Corinthians.

Paul goes on to mention divisions and factions, the former referring to cliques or splits among the members, and the latter, being more grave, are divisions which tear a congregation asunder. The cliques or splits in the congregation threaten to develop into divisions or heresies if certain evil beginnings run their course without being eradicated.[5] The idea of coming together as a church is antithetical to splits and divisions. These splits and heresies are repugnant to Paul. Fellowship at the altar presupposes doctrinal unity. Altar fellowship is church fellowship. Schisms and heresies are a scandal to that unity. As we survey 1 Corinthians, we get a feeling for just what these divisions were, and they included questions of doctrine, morality, worship, etc.

The Corinthians had made it impossible to eat the Lord's Supper when they came together. Lenski points out that *ouketi* with the infinitive means 'it is impossible'. The schisms and heresies (divisions and factions) are given further expression in the actual conduct of those gathered. The Lord's Supper was originally celebrated within the context of a meal called the 'Agape'. The various members brought food as they were able, and the congregation ate this solemn meal together, at the conclusion of which, the sacrament was celebrated with bread and wine reserved for that purpose. The Corinthian Agape had degenerated to a mere common meal during which the schisms and factions present in the church found expression. Some went ahead and ate before others leaving none for the poor, others became drunk on the wine served.[6] What an awful situation! How could this happen? How could Christians allow the celebration of the sacrament to degenerate to such a point?

The answer to this question is not to be found simply in the presence of divisions and cliques in the congregation. It goes deeper. The Agape, or, Love Feast degenerated when the Corinthians failed to discern the body of the Lord in the sacrament and began to look upon the sacrament as ordinary food, or a common meal. The central purpose of the sacramental meal, forgiveness, life and salvation, proclaimed, offered and given in the Supper; and the subordinate purpose of the Eucharist as a bond and testimony to the unity of faith and doctrine of those gathered at the Lord's table, were lost when the Real Presence was lost.[7]

> **Luther:** "St Paul reproves the Corinthians not for their unworthy remembrance of the suffering of Christ, as a child can easily read and prove. He describes in express words what the sin of the Corinthians was [1 Cor. 11:20ff.]: they did not wait for one another, but whoever came early ate early, so that those who came later found nothing and were humiliated, and thus **they made a mere feast out of the Supper as if it were nothing but an ordinary meal.** This is what he says: 'when you meet together, it is not the Lord's Supper that you eat. For each one goes ahead with his own meal.' Do you hear this? They did not celebrate the Supper of the Lord but **an indulgence of their belly**. While others were late in coming, they went ahead, allowed the Lord's Supper to be neglected, and ate their meal, just as Paul says afterward, 'When you come together to eat, wait for one another, lest you come together to be condemned' [11:33]. **You see then that the sin consisted in the eating**."[8]
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> **Lenski:** "In other words, the Agape ceased to be an Agape and degenerated into just ordinary eating, each clique eating by itself. This virtual abolition of the Agape made the celebration of the Holy Supper itself an impossibility. For at this time the two were still one celebration, the Agape leading up to the sacrament."[9]

Yes, the Corinthians were divided by cliques and splits, and yes, these divisions found unfortunate expression in their conduct towards one another at the Lord's Table. But the root problem is that they did not believe, or had forgotten, that the true body and blood of Christ are in the sacrament, and, not discerning the Lord's body, they were eating and drinking judgment upon themselves. This is a faith problem and Paul addresses it as such. Notice, as we move on to our next section, that Paul does not address the Corinthian problem by exhorting them to unity or brotherliness. He does not issue a call to greater sanctification.[10] He seeks to rectify what is lacking in their faith by teaching the Real Presence and its implications for worthy and unworthy reception

of the sacrament. The Supper is a means of grace to be received by penitent faith in what is there offered and given. Subordinately, it is a remembrance, a proclamation of the death of Christ, a bond and testimony of the unity of faith and doctrine shared by those gathered at the altar.

Paul Addresses the Corinthian Situation

Agreeing with Luther that "the sin consisted in the eating", I now hope to demonstrate how St. Paul dealt with the problem. Addressing the Corinthian situation as a faith problem, he teaches them again what they should have known and believed: The Real Presence of the Body and Blood of Christ in the Sacrament.

> 1 Corinthians 11:23-25 For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the *same* night in which He was betrayed took bread; *24* and when He had given thanks, He broke *it* and said, "Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me." *25* In the same manner *He* also *took* the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new testament in My blood. This do, as often as you drink *it,* in remembrance of Me."

The phrase, "I received...that which I also delivered to you" is strikingly similar to 15:3, "I delivered to you first of all that which I also received". In both passages Paul is transmitting doctrinal content of the highest import; and in both contexts is correcting error that has serious negative consequences. What Jesus had given Paul, he had already delivered to the Corinthians. They had already been taught proper doctrine concerning Holy Communion and it's proper administration. It seems, however, that they were in need of a refresher course, to say the least. We might be amazed that the Corinthians had fallen into error regarding the real presence and the purpose of the sacrament, except that we've seen it again and again in the history of the Lutheran Church, whether in the form of the Melancthonian Variata, Pietism, Rationalism, the Union Churches, or even modern ecumenism. So Paul reminds them, with nothing less than the words of our Lord, that the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper are the true body and blood of Christ. These words of the Lord also remind us that the celebration of the Lord's Supper is a remembrance of Him. And this remembrance, this celebration of the saving death of Christ, is done precisely in the oral reception of the body and blood given and shed for us. "Let them keep the sacrament according to these words, and all will be well" (Lenski p. 463).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to go into detail regarding what the verba teach regarding the Real Presence. For our purposes I wish merely to state what is necessary in order to follow St. Paul's argument. In the sacrament Christ gives us His own true body and blood for the forgiveness of sins and all other blessings, victory over sin and hell and strength for new life in Him. "As Christians partake of this sacrament together, they make a solemn public confession of Christ and of unity in the truth of His gospel."[11] Having presented the Dominical words, St. Paul now goes on to bring out their implications for worthy and unworthy reception.

> 1 Corinthians 11:26-32 For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes. *27* Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks *this* cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. *28* But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. *29* For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. *30* For this reason many

are weak and sick among you, and many sleep. *31* For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. *32* But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world.

In v. 26 Paul brings out what Jesus said about the Supper being a remembrance. When we commune, we proclaim the Lord's death till He comes. The Lord's Supper is pure Gospel, based entirely on Christ's sacrificial death and divine institution. Note how often Paul focuses us on 'eating this bread' and 'drinking this cup', connecting what he says about worthy and unworthy reception to the words of institution and the bread which is the body of Christ, and the wine which is the blood of Christ.

Paul now goes on to say whoever communes unworthily shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord (v. 27). Note, we sin, not against our brethren, not against symbols of Christ's body and blood, but against the very body and blood of the Lord received orally in the sacrament. Worthiness or unworthiness is a matter of faith, not of works. Therefore our Catechism teaches, "Fasting and bodily preparations are certainly fine outward training. But that person is truly worthy and well prepared who has faith in these words: 'given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins'. But anyone who does not believe these words or doubts them is unworthy and unprepared, for the words 'for you' require all hearts to believe." The Corinthians failure was a failure of faith. They did not believe the words of our Lord, and therefore they sinned in that they communed without "discerning the Lord's body", that is, without believing in the real presence.

> **Luther:** "Now the nature and manner of the words compel the conclusion that he who eats unworthily is guilty in regard to what he eats... For the text mightily compels that the sin occurs in the eating and the drinking...and yet it says that the sin is committed against the body and blood of the Lord."[12]

Note, in vss. 23-25 Paul lays out the verba which make plain the doctrine of the Real Presence. Then He says that unworthy communicants sin in the eating and drinking, against the body and blood of Christ. This passage teaches clearly that the unworthy and the wicked do receive the body and blood of Christ in the sacrament, and that in receiving it unworthily, they sin against that body and blood.

Because of the very real danger of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord it is necessary for a would-be communicant to examine, or test, himself as to his fitness for the sacrament. This involves contrition and faith, i.e., repentance. By faith here, I mean faith in Christ and in His words in the Sacrament. Those who are unable to examine themselves, are not to be given the Lord's Supper. Who are they? Infants, those who are unconscious, and those who have not been properly instructed in the faith and in the doctrine of the Lord's Supper. Such persons are denied the sacrament (until they are properly able to receive it) out of Christian love and concern for their spiritual welfare.

Now we come to v. 29, where Paul amplifies what he said in v. 27 so as to drive home his point about the need to examine one's self and commune worthily.

> 1 Corinthians 11:29 For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body.

Notice that Paul says that the unworthy communicant "eats and drinks judgment to himself". He does this because he eats and drinks "not discerning the Lord's body".[13] There has been much

discussion in our circles lately about the meaning of this phrase. It has been posited that "discerning the Lord's body" refers not the body of Christ in the sacrament, but to the mystical body of Christ, i.e., the church. This interpretation, however, violates the context of our pericope in several ways. V. 27 speaks of the unworthy eater sinning against the body and blood of the Lord, the same body and blood that are referred to in the verba, and not the mystical body. Further, all of the 'body' language in our context (11:17-34) refers to the body of Christ in the sacrament. While in another context, Paul uses 'body' language to describe the church (12:12ff.), he does not do so in our text. Rather, in our context he uses *'ecclesia'* and related "called, gathered assembly language" to talk about the church. It would be jarring indeed, if Paul, in a context so grammatically unified as this passage is, were to suddenly use the word 'body' in a way entirely different than he's used it several times in the five preceding verses when he is trying to make the same point.

No, the context will really only allow "discerning the Lord's body" to mean the body of Christ in the sacrament. Hence, to discern the Lord's body here, means to believe in the Real Presence, and to fail to discern the Lord's body means to not believe in the Real Presence.

> **Luther:** "The text proves irrefutably that 'eating unworthily' and 'not discerning the body of Christ' are the same thing, as we understand from the word just as it reads literally, that the Corinthians ate the bread with the misconception and misunderstanding that it was ordinary bread, and discerned no difference between this bread and other bread. This is certainly what is meant by 'unworthily eating the body of Christ'. This is why Paul admonishes them to examine themselves and perceive who they are and how they regard this bread. If they do not regard it as the body of Christ, or treat it as if it were not the body of Christ, then they do not discern the body of Christ; and this offense will not go unpunished."[14]

So Luther, and so the united voice of orthodox Lutheranism across the centuries. It is rather interesting to note that in addition to Lutheran dogmaticians and commentators, I consulted three commentaries by "Reformed" scholars to see how non-Lutherans would approach our passage. F.W. Grosheide, Leon Morris, and Matthew Henry were all in agreement that 'discerning the Lord's body' refers to the sacramental body and not the mystical body. What makes this especially interesting is that none of these commentators teaches the Real Presence, and yet they realize that this passage is referring to how we view the sacrament. Only Morris, in passing, mentions the mystical body interpretation, which he dismisses as violating the context of the passage.[15] So we cannot sidestep the biblical fact that knowingly allowing someone who does not believe in the Real Presence to commune at our altars is to facilitate them in eating and drinking judgment upon themselves.

What shape does this judgment take? In the Corinthian congregation the Lord imposed such temporal punishments upon unworthy communicants as physical illness, weakness, and death. I say temporal punishments because Paul uses the word "sleep" for death in v. 30, which is his usual way of referring to the death of a believer, and because he refers to these judgments as the chastening of the Lord in contrast to "condemnation with the world".

Before we move on to the second part of this paper, let me summarize what I have tried to demonstrate thus far. The sacrament of the altar has two purposes: it is a means of grace through which we receive forgiveness, life, and salvation, and it is a testimony to the unity of faith of those gathered together at the altar. Faith in Christ and His words in the sacrament are what constitutes worthy reception. Unworthy recipients receive judgment, not discerning the Lord's body.

Communion fellowship presupposes unity of faith and doctrine. Therefore, proper stewardship of the mysteries of God requires that in our churches the sacrament be given only to those who have received proper instruction and have given an account of their faith. In the second part of this paper I would like to discuss some of the current issues related to proper sacramental stewardship.

Part 2: Observations and Comments regarding our Current Situation

Is it true? Is it Biblical? Is it Lutheran?

There are many questions and attitudes about closed communion being voiced today. Some say it turns people off; it is a hindrance to growth. Some say that it is a relic from the past that is out of step in a church environment steeped in 'ambiguous denominationalism'. Some say it creates strife in the church. Others say that it is difficult to do in practice. Before we consider these questions, there is another question that must be considered first, apart from these other concerns, and that is, is closed communion biblical, is it true, is it Lutheran? Is it true that unworthy communicants receive the body and blood of Christ to their judgment? Is it true that communion fellowship is church fellowship, and that to admit one to the altar who is of a different faith than those gathered at the altar is a violation of the purpose of the sacrament as a bond and testimony to the unity of faith? If the practice of closed communion is biblical, and I believe that it is, then whatever difficulties it presents to us as we carry out the mission of the church are difficulties that the Lord wants us to deal with. And whatever offense is given by a faithful and loving application of this practice is unavoidable and is ultimately God's concern, in much the same way as the preaching of the cross is "an offense to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks" (1 Cor. 1:23). We must decide on the basis of Scripture, with the help of our Lutheran Confessions and the writings of our Orthodox fathers, and not on the basis of 'Theology by Anecdote', or 'Theology by Horror Story' so popular these days.

Love and Closed Communion.

It is sometimes assumed that the real motivation behind the practice of closed communion is a desire to exclude people; an expression of religious arrogance. Of all the Pastors I know who implement this practice in the congregations they serve, not one of them is motivated by any such attitude of unchristian pride. In fact, the opposite is true; it is a singularly humbling experience. As stewards of the mysteries (1 Cor. 4:1), love of God and His Word, and love of neighbor, is the proper motivation for closed communion. Loving our neighbor, we seek to keep him or her from incurring God's judgment by unworthy reception of the sacrament. Loving God and His Word we ask that our neighbor receive proper instruction and give account of their faith so that we may kneel in unity of faith and confession at the Lord's altar, and not seek to express a unity that is not really there. There are some who cannot see closed communion as a loving practice, to whom the question must be asked whether we are operating with a definition and conception of love that flows from God's Word or one that flows from popular culture. Luther: "Faith must be the master of love... Love ceases when it spoils the Word of God."[16]

Orthodoxy, Heterodoxy and Ambiguous Denominationalism.

Missouri Synod Lutherans believe that there is a true visible church of Christ on earth, and that the Evangelical Lutheran Church, where the gospel is purely preached and the sacraments are rightly administered, is that true visible church.[17] Churches which depart from the pure teaching of the Word of God in word or in practice, are heterodox and not orthodox. All Christians have a

responsibility to avoid heterodox churches and unite with orthodox churches. Church fellowship and hence, communion fellowship, is impossible between orthodox and heterodox churches.[18] In our stewardship of the mysteries, this must be taken into account.

However, we live at a time when many church people have no particular loyalty to the doctrinal positions of the denominations to which their congregations belong. In fact many have no particular loyalty to a denomination. We live at a time when many choose their church on purely private, individualistic grounds. Often we Missouri Synod people are told that this situation is inevitable, and that we had better adjust our practices to face denominational ambiguity as a reality.

It would be folly to think that the reasons for this declining denominational loyalty could be summed up in a sentence or two. Certainly there are numerous reasons for this situation. But whatever the many reasons may be, they are only symptoms of the real disease.

> "The real disease is declining loyalty to a God greater than ourselves. Put differently, the majority of Americans are not out to find a "user friendly" church; rather, if they are "church-shopping" at all, they go in search of a church which proclaims a God who will not demand too much of them. They certainly want a God who will keep his hands off at least a few of the patches which make up the quilts of their lives. They desire churches which might boast spotless nurseries and a myriad of "need-meeting" programs, but in the long run the thing that will most likely keep them coming back is the potential of these churches to serve as havens for selective unbelief."[19]

To such an attitude we ought not accommodate ourselves. Rather we should continue to stand forth as a beacon against such 'individualism', and hold people responsible, as God does, for the public profession of faith that they made when they became a member of a particular church body. Whatever a persons personal opinions may be, when they, publicly professing their faith, became members of a particular church, they declared themselves to be in unity with that church's confession, as a solemn public act which God and the congregation are called upon to witness.

Therefore we ought to make our decisions regarding who may commune, based not on the personal opinions of a visitor who claims to believe what we believe, but on the basis of the public confession that that person made before God and men when they joined the congregation to which they belong. If they wish to be Lutheran they may do so by making a profession of faith and becoming a member of our congregation, and then they will be able rightly to commune with us. In this way we safeguard prospective members and our own people against the continual slide into unbelief that is evident in these last days, and we encourage responsible, conscientious adherence to the truth which God takes so seriously.

Our Particular Lutheran Sorrow.

It is sad enough that there are sharp divisions between Christians due to doctrinal error. We Lutherans live in a double sorrow, because being a doctrinal, confessional church, we are particularly pained by the serious divisions among Lutherans. This is a tragedy, but it is a reality. There are, at last official count, 18 separate Lutheran denominations in this country. Three of these bodies are ethnic in makeup, four are Pietist, one large body is liberal, six are confessional, and three are anybody's guess. While most of these bodies are very tiny, when considered as a whole, three distinct groups emerge: Confessional Lutherans, Liberal Lutherans, and Pietistical Lutherans.

Confessional Lutherans, as typified by the LCMS, confess an infallible, inerrant Bible, and adopt a "quia" subscription to the Lutheran Confessions. The pietists, as typified by the Lutheran Brethren, would be very reserved about confessional subscription beyond the Augustana and the Catechism. Liberal Lutherans, as typified by the ELCA, have a 'low' view of Scripture, and a tentative subscription to the Lutheran Confessions.

As the recent release of the ELCA Sexuality Study, and plans for full communion with the Episcopalians and other "Reformed" bodies by the end of this decade, indicate, The ELCA and its predecessor bodies have been increasingly moving away from historic Lutheranism and embracing generic liberal Protestantism to such an extent that even LCMS members who were formerly naive about the doctrinal situation in ELCA are now realizing that there is little hope for fellowship in that direction. It is becoming more and more difficult to avoid the conclusion that ELCA is a heterodox body and that we are fully justified in declining to have altar and pulpit fellowship with them. Our communion practices should reflect this realization. We do no one any good by camouflaging the errors of their church with a show of fellowship that doesn't in truth exist.

Maximum Sacramental Stewardship and Minimum Offense.

Closed communion is always going to offend some people no matter how lovingly it is applied or how carefully it is explained. There is little we can do about that. However, we may want to begin to rethink our communion practices in order to be faithful stewards and at the same time minimizing possible offense. It is instructive here to look to the church's past and see how things were handled by our predecessors. In the early church, all catechumens and all visitors were escorted out after the sermon and before the communion began, so that only members were even present at the communion service. In addition, letters of commendation were given to traveling Christians by their Pastors or Bishops so that they would be accepted in congregations along their journey. There is some indication also that in the early church some congregations met for worship early in the morning, then went about their daily tasks, gathering again in the evening for the Agape and Holy Communion. In the Lutheran Church from the times of the Reformation until around the second world war the common practice was some form of "pre-registration" which gave the Pastor an opportunity to speak with people in the interest of their spiritual welfare, and avoided the unfortunate situation of trying to practice faithful communion stewardship in the five minutes before a service begins. In the congregation where the writer grew up, a hymn was sung after the General Prayer, and those not communing were given an opportunity to leave before the Communion began. It is increasingly common for congregations to put a 'communion statement' in the bulletin to help visitors understand our practice. If this is enacted an effort should be made to avoid the Scylla of a hard nosed, arrogant statement, and the Charybdis of an obtuse statement that leaves the visitor wondering. As we hammer out this practice of closed communion together, and begin to come to agreement under the Word, we will also have to talk about the best ways to clearly, yet winsomely communicate our position, and also how to adopt universal practices from congregation to congregation so that our churches do not step on one anothers' toes regarding communion practices.

The Law, the Gospel, and closed communion.

It has been said by some, that closed communion is a violation of the proper distinction between law and gospel in that it makes a law out of the gospel, i.e., the administration of the Lord's Supper. I disagree. The Gospel and Baptism were given to create faith (and also to strengthen already present faith). Holy Communion, however, was given to strengthen a faith that is already

there. Proper preaching of the Gospel does not presuppose faith, but proper administration of Holy Communion, and proper reception of Holy Communion, do presuppose faith. The Eucharist is not used to create faith, or to create unity; it strengthens an already present faith, and expresses an already present unity among those communing together. Furthermore, unworthy use of the sacrament is warned against in rather strong language (1 Cor. 11:27-30). Therefore when we decline to commune one who does not believe the real presence, we properly apply the law to that person, who comes without proper faith, and for reasons other than those for which the sacrament is given. Secondly, when we decline to commune one who is not united with us in faith and doctrine, we are recognizing what Scripture is very clear about: doctrinal error is a sin, and like all sin, is to be repented of and forsaken by the grace of God. Until that happens, there can be no expression of a unity that really doesn't exist.

In each of these cases, every effort is made to clearly articulate the Scriptural teaching regarding the purpose of the Sacrament and why we do what we do. Many times this results in fruitful discussion that leads to good things for all concerned. Sometimes not. However, even in witnessing, preaching, and counseling, the proper application of Law and Gospel doesn't always meet with happy reactions. And that brings me to my final comment:

Closed communion and cross bearing.

If closed communion is the true and biblical way to practice stewardship of the mysteries (and again, I believe that it is), then we must practice it lovingly and conscientiously. If in properly administering the means of grace, offense is given or taken, we must be willing to take our lumps. Such is part of the 'scandal' of the cross. We live in an age of theological relativism and social egalitarianism. Most of the churches in our land that go under the heading of 'mainline', have capitulated, to one degree or another, to this spirit. Nothing annoys and angers the spirit of this age more than when persons or churches represent themselves as being 'right' or 'orthodox', unless they do it unnoticably, off in a corner somewhere. The minute our claim to orthodoxy becomes noticeable, the world heaps scorn upon us. The practice of closed communion is one of those places where orthodox Lutheranism flies in the face of theological relativism and social egalitarianism. We should not be surprised, nor should we flinch, when we are reviled and even persecuted. Rather, rejoicing that "great is your reward in heaven", we happily take up our crosses and follow Christ, who for our sakes took up His cross.

Endnotes

[1]

Although the term 'close communion' has been used for a good many years in Missouri Synod circles, Dr. Norman Nagel has demonstrated rather conclusively that 'closed communion' is the proper term. See: Concordia Journal, Jan. 1991, p. 27.

[2]

i.e., those who are members of, and/or regular communicants at, churches whose confession of faith is different from ours.

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...with a few modifications. For example, the Eastern Orthodox churches commune infants.

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

[5]

Lenski, R.C.H., Interpretation of 1 and 2 Corinthians. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1937, pp. 456-457.

[6]

As a side note, this reference to drunkenness points out just what is meant by the fruit of the vine, or wine, in the light of fundamentalist and pietistical protestations to the contrary. To use any substitute for the biblical elements raises, or can raise, doubts in the recipient as to whether what is offered is what Christ instituted. Such doubt makes faithful reception impossible.

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It's only a short step from 'commemorative meal' to 'pot-luck supper' and beyond!?

[8]

Luther, Martin, Confession Concerning Christ's Supper, LW, vol. 37, pp. 342-343.

[9]

Lenski, R.C.H., Interpretation of 1 and 2 Corinthians, p. 459.

[10]

I do not mean to imply that the Corinthians' sanctification did not need addressing, or that it is improper to preach sanctification. It is through the Gospel, however, that the Spirit creates faith, and such faith bears fruit in good works. Real sanctification is Gospel motivated and Spirit empowered.

[11]

Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1991, pp. 234-235.

[12]Quoted in Lenski, p. 479.

[13]

I have followed the Byazntine text here because I believe it to be the superior reading. Although the Nestle/UBS text follows the Alexandrian texts, the level of certainty noted in the apparatus of UBS 3, {C}, strengthens the case for the Majority Text reading. However the context shows clearly how "body" is to be interpreted even if one chooses the reading followed by the critical texts.

[14]LW, vol. 37, p. 347.

[15]

Grosheide, F.W., Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1953. Henry, Matthew, Commentary on the Whole Bible. Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991. Morris, Leon, The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975.

[16]

Luther, Martin, Erlangen edition, vol. 39, pp. 121 - 122, quoted from an unpublished translation by Pr. Joel Baseley.

[17]

Walther, C.F.W. The True Visible Church *and* The Form of a Christian Congregation. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961.

[18]

Walther, "Communion Fellowship," Essays for the Church, Vol. 1. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992.

[19]

Shurb, Ken, "Declining Denominational Loyalty," Logia, vol. 2, No. 4, p. 46.