

STRAIGHT TALK ABOUT CLOSED COMMUNION

by Pr. William P. Terjesen

Dear Pastor,

1. *We have been hearing a lot about closed communion recently. What is it?*

I'm glad you asked. Closed communion (some call it 'close communion') is the Bible-based practice of normally communing only those who have been properly instructed in the teachings of the Ev. Lutheran Church and who have shown, through confirmation, profession of faith, or other proper reception into one of our churches, that they are united with us in faith and doctrine. We do this because the Bible tells us that people who fail to 'discern the body of the Lord' eat and drink judgment upon themselves,

1 Corinthians 11:27-29 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***.

and because communing people of a different faith violates the secondary purpose of the sacrament as a testimony to the unity of faith.

Acts 2:42 ⁴² And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, ***in the breaking of bread***, and in prayers.

Romans 16:17 ¹⁷ Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, ***contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them***.

Look carefully at what the Lord is saying in these three passages of Scripture. Proper, faithful administration of the Sacrament of the Altar presupposes the practice of closed communion.

2. *When I look around at the church today, I see that many pastors and congregations do not practice closed communion, and this includes many Missouri Synod congregations and pastors. Is closed communion simply the personal opinion of some of our more conservative pastors such as yourself? Is each Missouri Synod pastor free to decide for himself whether or not he will practice closed communion?*

Your observations are very perceptive. Most 'protestant' churches in the world today practice 'open communion', allowing more or less anyone who wishes to commune to do so. They do this because they do not believe that the true body and blood of Christ are present and distributed in the Sacrament, and because they do not adhere to what the Bible teaches about church fellowship and doctrinal unity. 'Open communion' is also practiced by liberal and pietistical Lutheran Churches like the ELCA (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America) and the Lutheran Brethren, because to one degree or another these churches have abandoned the clear teachings of the Bible and our Lutheran Confessions (Book of Concord).

Sadly, I must admit, that many pastors and congregations in our Missouri Synod have abandoned the practice of closed communion. This is especially true in the so-called 'Salt-Water Districts' of our Synod. In the heartland of our country, you will still find many LCMS congregations and pastors who faithfully practice closed communion. This abandonment of closed communion by so many pastors and congregations is disheartening to Synodical officials, pastors and congregations who wish to remain faithful to this Bible-based practice, and it causes

much confusion and distrust within our circles.

Closed communion is most definitely NOT simply the personal opinion or practice of some of our more conservative pastors. It is not an option that each pastor may do or not do as he sees fit. I do not seek to practice closed communion because I personally like being strict about these things, or because I like to assert my dominance over people. If I were to bar the way to Holy Communion for people simply on the basis of my personal preference or opinion, and not on the basis of the Word of God, the Lutheran Confessions and the theology and practice of the Missouri Synod, I would be a cad, a lout, and a false teacher. No, those who practice closed communion do so precisely because it is taught in the Bible and the Book of Concord, and is the official position of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

Let me quote for you the Missouri Synod's official position in this matter:

Theology and Practice of the Lord's Supper, A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, LCMS, May 1983.

"In keeping with the principle that the celebration and reception of the Lord's Supper is a confession of the unity of faith, while at the same time recognizing that there will be instances when sensitive pastoral care needs to be exercised, ***the Synod has established an official practice requiring 'that pastors and congregations of the LCMS, except in situations of emergency and in special cases of pastoral care, commune individuals of only those synods which are now in fellowship with us.'*** By following this practice whereby only those individuals who are members of the Synod or of a church body with which the Synod is in altar and pulpit fellowship are ordinarily communed, pastors and congregations preserve the integrity of their witness to the Gospel of Christ as it is revealed in the Scriptures and confessed in the Lutheran confessional writings." (1967 Res. 2-19. See also 1969 Res. 3-18 and 1981 Res 3-01)

Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod, p. 14.

"Since God ordained that His Word only, without the admixture of human doctrine, be taught and believed in the Christian Church, 1 Pet. 4:11; Jn. 8:31-32; 1 Tim. 6:3-4, all Christians are required by God to discriminate between orthodox and heterodox church-bodies, Mat. 7:15, ***to have church-fellowship only with orthodox church-bodies***, and, in case they have strayed into heterodox church-bodies, to leave them, Rom. 16:17. ***We repudiate unionism, that is, church-fellowship with the adherents of false doctrine***, as disobedience to God's command, as causing divisions in the Church, Rom. 16:17; 2 Jn. 9-10, and as involving the constant danger of losing the Word of God entirely, 2 Tim. 2:17-21.

"The orthodox character of a church is established ***not by its mere name nor by its outward acceptance of, and subscription to, an orthodox creed, but by the doctrine which is actually taught in its pulpits, in its theological seminaries, and in its publications.***"

What is the responsibility of pastors and congregations with respect to this official position of the Missouri Synod? Our Handbook says, "The constitution, bylaws, and all other rules and regulations of the Synod apply to all congregational and individual members of the Synod....The Synod expects every member congregation to respect its resolutions and to consider them of binding force if they are in accordance with the Word of God and if they appear applicable as far as the condition of the congregation is concerned." (2.39, pp. 32-33) So, pastors and congregations are not free to choose whether or not to practice closed communion. Honesty

and duty requires that we abide by the resolutions of Synod if they are in accord with the Word of God. And, as will be shown below, the Synod's policy IS in accord with the Word of God.

3. *Is closed communion a new idea in the church?*

No. Closed communion is as old as the Lord's Supper. In the early church, visitors and catechumens (people receiving instruction in preparation for Baptism and church membership) were allowed to attend the service until the sermon was ended. Then they were escorted out of the church and the doors were shut so that only the members were even present during the communion service proper.

In addition, travelling Christians were given letters of recommendation from their pastors so that they would be welcomed to Holy Communion by the pastors of the churches they visited in their travels. Without such a letter of recommendation, one could not commune.

Closed communion is and always has been, the practice of the Eastern Orthodox churches, and the Roman Catholic church.

Closed communion has always been the practice of the Ev. Lutheran Church. In the days of Luther, for example, Holy Communion was celebrated every Sunday, but only those members of the congregation who had previously registered and been examined by the pastor were allowed to commune. The Lutheran Church continued faithful in this teaching until rationalism and unionism reared their heads in the 18th and 19th centuries. Rationalism and the forced uniting of Lutherans and the Reformed into 'union' churches were what caused our Missouri Synod fathers and mothers to leave Germany and come to America and practice pure Lutheranism.

When our LCMS ancestors got here they discovered the bewildering world of American 'denominationalism'. Suddenly they were surrounded by all kinds of different churches with all kinds of different teachings. Even the Lutheran Church bodies that were already here had been infected with pietism, revivalism, and rationalism to the point where they no longer adhered to the pure doctrine of the Word of God. Therefore the LCMS, in faithfulness to that Word, and in honest recognition of the situation around them, refused to have fellowship with those Lutheran denominations which were no longer faithful to the Lutheran Confessions. And so it is down to our own day.

4. *Why then does closed communion seem new or unfamiliar to so many people in our congregations?*

After WWII, the effects of 'americanization' and increased contact with non-Missouri Synod people and their theology, contributed to a general but growing loosening of the doctrine and practice of the Synod. The period from the mid 50's to the mid 70's was a period of slow but sure decline and disintegration in the Missouri Synod. After the Bible believing people in the Synod successfully turned back a liberal take-over in the mid 1970's there began a steady reclaiming of the doctrinal faithfulness of past generations. During the period of decline, practices like closed communion faded into the background with the growth of liberalism. As the Missouri Synod has begun to recapture its confessional heritage practices like closed communion are coming back, and many people, who are hearing about it for the first time, think that it is something new.

5. *Where is closed communion taught in the Bible?*

We learn from the Words of Institution that the bread and wine of Holy Communion are the true Body and Blood of Christ:

1 Corinthians 11:23-26 ²³ 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 covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink *it*, in remembrance of Me." ²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes.

This blessed truth is also taught in **1 Corinthians 10:16**:

¹⁶ The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?

We also learn from the Word of God that those who partake in an unworthy manner sin against the Body and Blood of Christ, and, failing to discern the body of the Lord in the Sacrament, eat and drink judgment on themselves:

1 Corinthians 11:27-32 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.

Therefore pastors and congregations should never knowingly give the sacrament to someone who is unable to make proper use of it. To do so would place them in spiritual danger. It is not loving to knowingly let someone eat and drink judgment to themselves. True Christian love seeks to instruct and prepare a person to receive worthily.

Closed communion is also taught in those passages which treat of fellowship and unity. For example:

Acts 2:42 ⁴² And they continued steadfastly in the ***apostles' doctrine and fellowship,*** in the ***breaking of bread,*** and in prayers.

Here Communion is seen as a testimony to the unity of faith among those believers united in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship. This fellowship is spelled out further by St. Paul who says:

1 Corinthians 10:16-17 ¹⁶ The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? ¹⁷ ***For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread.***

What of those who do not abide by the doctrine of the apostles; whose confession differs from the teaching of the Word of God? St. Paul tells us to avoid them!

Romans 16:17 ¹⁷ Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause ***divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them.***

While avoiding those who believe differently than we do does not mean that we should be mean to them; to speak evil of them; or to refuse to communicate with them; it also most

certainly does not mean that we should admit them to the Lord's table! Church fellowship (communion fellowship) is to be denied to those who are of a different confession of faith, because the Lord's Supper is a testimony to the unity of faith.

6. If, as seems obvious from the Bible verses quoted above, closed communion is taught in Scripture, and has always been practiced by the church catholic, why are so many Christians angered by it and opposed to it?

Many of our people come from outside of Lutheranism, or from Lutheran Churches who have not practiced closed communion for decades. Therefore, they react against it because it is something new and foreign to their churchly experience. In their perception it seems as if suddenly we're getting tough about letting people receive communion. In a way, you can't blame these people for being confused or angered. But, once the teaching of the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions is made plain to them, they ought to see the rightness of the practice.

We live in a permissive society. It is getting harder and harder for us to say "no" to anyone about anything. Secular relativism has made it impossible for us to punish criminals properly, discipline children properly. In our society, no one is responsible for anything and everything is considered a "right". Even church people are affected by this outlook. Closed communion is one of those places where the church must occasionally say "no" to someone, and this drives modern people up the wall. It is high time that we realize that this permissive inability to say "no" is a weakness that is destroying our society and our churches, and that we rediscover such things as truth, courage and character.

The religious spirit of the day is an ecumenical one. Churches like the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod are (thank God) thoroughly out of step with the goings on of the World and National Council of Churches, and with the ecumenical activities of mainline churches. But many of our people have been affected by this minimizing of the doctrinal differences that divide our churches. We are often considered to be nit-pickers because we withhold fellowship over what (uninformed) lay people consider to be insignificant differences. "One church is as good as another. We're all heading down the same road, anyway", is the attitude of a considerable number of our people. It is important for us to teach our people that doctrinal differences are extremely important, and to warn them that the modern Ecumenical Movement is a prominent sign of the apostasy of our age.

We live in an age characterized by relativism. That is, many people no longer believe that there is anything like absolute right and wrong. Truth is looked upon as relative. The prevailing attitude is, "I'm OK, you're OK." This relativism is especially noticeable in modern peoples' attitude towards religion. We are infuriated and frustrated when we go to the doctor and he is hesitant about making a diagnosis. We would soon abandon a mechanic who told us that there was nothing wrong with our car, but that our car is "differently operational". Imprecise mathematicians and scientists we despise. Yet when it comes to the eternal welfare of our souls, we like to keep things loose and 'indefinite'.

Therefore there is nothing so irritating to the modern secular mindset as preachers and churches who claim that they actually know and teach what God thinks and says. We like unsure ministers and hazy churches where our selective unbelief won't be challenged overmuch. So when the average American says, "I'm a Lutheran" or "I'm a Methodist", it often means little, or nothing at all other than that they started attending that church because it was nearby. And when people move, they are likely to join the nearest 'nice' church, no matter what it teaches. What is important to such people is their 'individualism'. They go by what they personally believe or feel in their hearts, and pay little attention to what the church to which they belong teaches. Such relativistic individualists (in a consumer society where the customer is always right) can't bear it when someone says, "no."

Some otherwise fine Lutheran people just cannot accept the idea that some among their loved ones or friends have made the decision to leave the Ev. Lutheran Church in violation of their confirmation vows and to join a heterodox church body. The idea that a sister, a son, or a dear friend has, by joining a heterodox church, has separated themselves from fellowship with the Lutheran Church, is simply too painful to accept. Therefore they cannot understand why these people are not allowed to commune when they visit the congregation they were raised in.

We must come to grips with the biblical fact that when you join a church, that act is a public testimony given before God and the world, and bound with an oath, that you subscribe to the teachings of that church. Whatever your personal opinions may be, your membership in this church is your public confession of faith before the world that you believe and confess what we believe, teach and confess.

Romans 10:9-10 ⁹ that if you ***confess with your mouth*** the Lord Jesus and ***believe in your heart*** that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.

¹⁰ For ***with the heart one believes unto righteousness***, and ***with the mouth confession is made unto salvation***.

The confession of our mouths and the belief of our hearts is supposed to be the same thing. The idea that a person would belong to a church but not necessarily believe what that church teaches is an attitude unworthy of Christian profession.

7. *OK, I can understand declining to commune those who are not Lutheran, but what about other Lutherans such as members of the ELCA?*

Because our congregation is a member of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, our local implementation and practice of church fellowship should be in accord with those of the Synod. The Missouri Synod implements and practices church fellowship by entering into official Altar and Pulpit Fellowship with denominations which confess the same faith, and by declining Altar and Pulpit Fellowship with those denominations which confess a different faith (even if they are in-name Lutheran). For example, the Missouri Synod is in Altar and Pulpit Fellowship with The Lutheran Church-Canada, The Confessional Lutheran Church of Finland, The Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany, and many others all over the world. This means that the ministers of these churches may preach in one another's pulpits and the people may commune at one another's altars. On the other hand, the LCMS has declined Altar and Pulpit Fellowship with the ELCA and many other Lutheran church bodies because of SERIOUS doctrinal differences. This means that though we realize that there are many Christian people in such churches, we cannot accept those churches as genuinely Lutheran, and hence, cannot enjoy Altar and Pulpit Fellowship with their pastors or members. One's church membership is one's public confession before the world. Every Christian has a duty to leave erring churches and unite with an orthodox one.

This brief paper is hardly the place to elaborate on the errors of the ELCA. Let me simply mention a few in passing so that the reader may get an idea of the seriousness of our divisions.

1. The ELCA denies that the Bible is the infallible, inerrant Word of God.
2. The ELCA ordains women to the office of the ministry, which is expressly forbidden in the Bible.
3. The ELCA allows its pastors to deny the miracles of the Bible, including the historical resurrection of Jesus from the dead!
4. The ELCA no longer believes that homosexuality and many other sexual sins are, in fact, sins.

5. The ELCA is about to enter into Altar and Pulpit fellowship with several non-Lutheran church bodies who deny the Real Presence, raising the question as to whether the ELCA still believes it.

The list could go on and on. I refer the interested reader to What's Going On Among the Lutherans, by Leppien and Smith, published by Northwestern Publishing House (800) 662-6022. It is not simply the name "Lutheran" that makes a church Lutheran, but the fact that it adheres to and actually teaches and confesses the Lutheran faith in its congregations, pulpits, seminaries, periodicals, etc.

8. *What can I do personally to uphold the Bible-based practice of closed communion?*

First, see to it that you make diligent use of the means of grace (the Word of God and the Sacraments) and encourage your brothers and sisters in Christ to do the same. Holy Communion was not meant to be an occasional optional extra. Word and Sacrament are at the center of the church's life.

Secondly, pray for your pastor, and support and speak well of his upholding of the biblical practice of closed communion. He takes a good deal of heat for his faithfulness to God's Word, and needs to know that His people are behind him. Let those who criticize the pastor know that you thank God that your pastor is willing to stand up for the truth. (If your pastor does not yet practice closed communion, encourage him to do so and assure him of your support and prayers.)

Thirdly, when you are travelling and you visit other churches do not commune or seek to commune in churches that are not in Altar and Pulpit Fellowship with the LCMS. And when you attend a Missouri Synod church, arrive a few minutes early, and speak to the Pastor, informing him that you are an LCMS member. That way he will not be surprised by a stranger appearing at the altar.

Fourthly, when you bring a friend to church, point out the communion statement in the bulletin and explain our practice in a kind and friendly manner. Or, if you'd rather, direct your friend to the pastor. If you feel that your guest would be offended by our Biblical practice of closed communion, bring them to the non-communion service. Actually I have found that most people who visit our churches for the first time are not offended by closed communion.

Thank you for taking the time to read this paper. I hope this brief discussion of closed communion has answered your questions and convinced you that our practice is Biblical and confessional. If you have further questions, please don't hesitate to speak with the pastor. May God bless you in His grace and truth.