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“ADMITTANCE  
TO THE LORD’S  
SUPPER”

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The Reverend Eric Lange  
Redeemer Lutheran Church  
Gresham, Oregon



## *“Admittance to the Lord’s Supper”*

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Introductory Note: I share following written by The Reverend Eric Lange, Redeemer Lutheran Church, Gresham, Oregon.

If you do not agree with the positions stated here, I ask that you at least consider the arguments and put the best construction on my actions, my motivation, and my concern

- to be faithful to the vows made at my ordination and subsequent installations, and
- to fulfill the great commission by *“teaching them to observe all things I have commanded you”* (St. Matthew 28:20).

My goal is not division, but that our Congregation be united under the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ as confessed in Holy Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions.

The Reverend David L. Adler, Pastor  
Bethlehem Ev. Lutheran Church  
Palestine, Texas

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### **Many Today Suggest:**

That **admittance** to the Lord’s Supper should be virtually automatic and that pastors and congregations are being judgmental and unloving when they try to monitor **admittance** to the Lord’s Supper.

### **What Does This Mean?**

This perception has tempted many a pastor and congregation to adopt what is basically a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy regarding the beliefs and the lives of those who receive the Sacrament (open communion). Others, recognizing that they have some responsibility in this matter, have adopted communion statements to help the visitor determine their preparedness. Unfortunately, these statements are often imprecise and they really do not provide the sort of **pastoral** examination envisioned and promoted by our Lutheran Confessions. Others mistakenly view denominational affiliation as sufficient for reception of the Sacrament, again failing to practice the sort of **pastoral** oversight desired by our Lutheran Confessions. The pressure of society and the fear of appearing unloving constantly tempt us to fail to perform our **pastoral** duties. We have all failed in this area at one time or another. In this environment we all need to be *“reminded of the terrible responsibility which should properly concern every Christian (namely, that whoever uses the sacrament unworthily is guilty of the body and blood of Christ) ...”* (Augsburg Confession, Article XXIV, the Mass, 12)

## Why Does This Matter?

Because our Lord matters, His mandates matter, His gifts matter and His people matter. Our Lord desires us to honor Him in everything. Our Lord wants us to treasure His gifts and the means by which His gifts come to us. Our Lord wants us to love our neighbor as ourselves.

## The Bible Teaches ...

- ... that pastors are shepherds and overseers. *“Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you **overseers**. Be **shepherds** of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood”* (Acts 20:28).
- Such imagery of oversight and responsibility for others is found in both the Old and New Testament. In Ezekiel, the prophet is compared to a watchman. He is told: *“When I say to the wicked, ‘O wicked man, you will surely die,’ and you do not speak out to dissuade him from his ways, that wicked man will die for his sin, and **I will hold you accountable** for his blood. But if you do warn the wicked man to turn from his ways and he does not do so, he will die for his sin, but you will have saved yourself”* (Ezekiel 33:8-9).
- In the New Testament, the author of Hebrews writes, *“Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who **must give an account**. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you”* (Hebrews 13:17).
- Indeed, God warns all shepherds of His people that, *“I ... will hold them **accountable** for my flock”* (Ezekiel 34:10).

## Thus, Historic Lutheranism Teaches ...

- ... on the basis of the Bible, that pastors have divine authority and *“a terrible responsibility”* when it comes to distributing the Lord’s body and blood.
- The Augsburg Confession states that *“the power of bishops is a power ... to administer and distribute the sacraments”* (Augsburg Confession, XXVIII, 5).
- Recognizing this authority and responsibility, it cites approvingly the fact that, *“Chrysostom reports how the priest stood every day, inviting some to Communion and forbidding others to approach”* (Article, XXIV, 36)
- Furthermore, the Augsburg Confession boasts, *“Confession has not been abolished by the preachers on our side. The custom has been retained among us of not administering the sacrament to those who have not been previously examined and absolved”* (Article XXV, Confession, 1).
- Luther bluntly states, in the Large Catechism, *“we do not intend to admit to the sacrament and administer it to those who do not know what they seek or why they come”* (Large Catechism, V, 2).

- In all of this, it is clear that the Lutheran Confessions envision the pastor playing a significant role in determining who receives the sacrament and not just letting the individual communicant decide for himself. Indeed, at that time they rejoiced in the fact that the *“people are accustomed to receive the sacrament together, in so far as they are fit to do so ... for none are admitted unless they are first heard and examined”* (Augsburg Confession, XXIV, 5-6).

### **The Bible Teaches ...**

- ... that failure to do our pastoral duty can have fearful consequences for us and for those placed under our oversight. The Bible tells us that God chastises disobedience against His will, especially among His people.
- In 2 Samuel 6:6ff. the LORD strikes down Uzzah because he touched the ark of the covenant, even though it was done with the best of intentions.
- We also read that David was angry at the LORD for killing Uzzah, but 1 Chronicles 15:13 makes clear that David failed to perform his duties as an overseer of the holy things in a proper way. His failure to recognize his “responsibility” led to Uzzah’s death.
- Such disciplining actions are not confined to the Old Testament as the account of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1ff) proves.
- In fact, the Bible clearly teaches that unworthy reception of the Body and Blood of Christ brings one into judgment and possible physical discipline. St. Paul expressly states that some within Corinth were being physically chastised by the Lord for receiving the Lord’s Body and Blood in an unworthy manner. After describing the Corinthians misuse of the Lord’s Supper, Paul says, *“For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep”* (1 Corinthians 11:28-30).
- In the Scriptures, “fallen asleep” refers to physical death. That this chastisement comes from the Lord is seen in the fact that Paul goes on to say, *“But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world”* (1 Corinthians 11:31).

### **Thus, Historic Lutheranism Teaches ...**

- ...in accordance with the Bible, that although it is true that the chief use of the sacraments is as *“signs and testimonies of the will of God toward us, instituted to awaken and confirm faith in those who use them”* (Augsburg Confession, XIII, 1), it is also true that in the Lord’s Supper, *“He [Christ] is just as much present to exercise and manifest judgment on unrepentant guests as he is to work life and*

*consolation in the hearts of believing and worthy guests” (Formula of Concord, Epitome, VII, 17).*

- But what puts one in danger of God’s judgment? The confessions here speak of “unrepentant guests.” Our Lutheran forefathers firmly believed that the sort of physical chastisement that God distributed at Corinth can still be administered by God today. That is why they encouraged the practice of private confession prior to reception of the Lord’s Supper.

### **The Bible Teaches ...**

- ... that one can be “unrepentant” both in regard to sins of life and in regard to sins of doctrine and that we must repent of both types of sin. Thus, our Lord criticizes both the life and the teaching of the Pharisees, when he cites Isaiah, saying, *“These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; **their teachings** are but rules taught by men”* (St. Matthew 15:8-9).

### **Thus, Historic Lutheranism Teaches ...**

- ...that doctrine and life, that is, beliefs and activities can profane God’s holy name. In the Small Catechism, Luther asks, *“How is God’s name kept holy?”* Luther answers, *“God’s name is kept holy when the Word of God is **taught** in its truth and purity, and we, as children of God, also lead **holy lives** according to it. Help us to do this, dear Father in heaven! But anyone who **teaches** or **lives** contrary to God’s Word profanes the name of God among us. Protect us from this heavenly Father!”* (Small Catechism, 1st Petition of the Lord’s Prayer).

### **The Bible Teaches ...**

- ... that we are to forgive those who repent of their sin. *“So watch yourselves. If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him”* (St. Luke 17:3).
- Sin is to be forgiven. However, sin must also be rebuked. Rebuke and repentance are necessary because where there is rebuke and repentance, sin is not merely tolerated, but actually forgiven. Thus, the Bible warns against tolerating sin when it states, *“Do not share in the sins of others”* (1 Timothy 5:22).
- Paul criticizes those who do sinful things and even more so those who *“approve of those who practice them”* (Romans 1:32).
- In the same way, the Bible also warns against tolerating false doctrine, when it states, *“If anyone comes to you and does not bring this **teaching**, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him **shares** in his wicked work”* (2 John 10-11).

- That these biblical admonitions concern **church fellowship** and not social and familial interaction is seen in 1 Corinthians 10:14-18, where Paul deals specifically with the Lord's Supper.
- A constant warning in the New Testament is that **toleration** of sin and false doctrine leads to **approval** of the same. That is why, Paul warns that *"A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough"* in connection both with sins of life (1 Corinthians 5:6-7) **and with sins of doctrine** (Galatians 5:9).
- To prevent such toleration of sin, the Bible teaches that those who are unrepentant for sin in life **and doctrine** must be excluded from church fellowship and the privilege of communion until they repent. Thus, in the case of impenitence in life, Paul tells the Corinthian Christians, *"Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. 'Expel the wicked man from among you'"* (1 Corinthians 5:12-13).
- And regarding doctrine, Paul warns, *"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).

#### **Thus, Historic Lutheranism Teaches ...**

- ... that the impenitent are unfit to receive the Sacrament. Luther says, *"We must ... make a distinction ... among men. Those who are shameless and unruly must be told to stay away, for they are not fit to receive the forgiveness of sins since they do not desire it and do not want to be good"* (Large Catechism, V, 58).
- And Luther further denies the Sacrament to anyone *"who desires no grace and absolution and has no intention to amend his life"* (Large Catechism, V, 58, 61).
- That the Lutheran Confessions recognize that false doctrine is sinful and can involve impenitence is seen in the fact that the Confessions often condemn false teachers, false teachings and their *"stiff-necked proponents"* (Preface to the Book of Concord).
- Even the Augsburg Confession which is the most irenic (peace seeking) of the Confessions contains condemnations. Our Lutheran forefathers did not practice communion fellowship with those of a different profession of the faith because they believed that the sacraments are *"marks of profession among men"* (Augsburg Confession, XIII, 1).
- They did this in obedience to Paul's admonition to *"watch out for"* and to *"keep away from"* those causing divisions by teaching things contrary to apostolic teaching. They did this in fulfillment of our Lord's words, *"if your brother sins, rebuke him"* (St. Luke 17:3).

## What Does This Mean?

It means that once again we need to be reminded of our **pastoral** responsibility. In Malachi, God condemns the priests for the sacrifices that they were offering (Malachi 1:6). What would prompt the priests to offer inferior sacrifices? Evidently, they were afraid of the people. The people brought animals with blemishes and the priests were afraid to reject their offerings, since the priests lived on those offerings. Why are we afraid to practice proper pastoral care with people that approach our altars today? Do we not face the same pressure as the priests in Malachi's day? Are we not afraid that insisting on proper pastoral oversight might "turn-off" prospective members or offend current members? This is why we all need to be reminded of what is actually being distributed in the Lord's Supper, that the Sacrament can be received to one's judgment, and that we have responsibilities as shepherds, as congregations, and as communicants. It means we need to return to the Bible and to our Lutheran Confessions for guidance on these matters and not be forgetful of the responsibilities that come with the great treasure of Christ's Body and Blood. To this end, may Luther's admonition and prayer be our own.

*So look to it, you pastors and preachers. Our ministry today is something else than it was under the pope. It has become a serious and saving responsibility. Consequently it now involves much more trouble and labor, danger and trial, and in addition, it brings you little of the world's gratitude and rewards. But Christ Himself will be our reward if we labor faithfully. The Father of all grace help us to do just that. To Him be praise and thanks forever through Christ our Lord. Amen. (Preface to the Small Catechism, 26-27)*



Pastor Eric Lange  
Redeemer Lutheran Church  
Gresham, Oregon

