

Dear members and friends of St. John,

One of the most confusing practices to members of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod seems to be the practice of **'close' Communion**. The Word, spoken and preached, and Holy Communion are the means in which God sustains baptized Christians. Understanding our communion practice, and the biblical basis for it, is therefore important for all of us to know and appreciate.

'Close' or 'closed' communion dates back to the early Christian church. In the first few centuries after Christ's death and resurrection, the rites of Holy Communion were firmly established. In the early church, worship service would include the reading of Scripture, the chanting of the liturgy, and the spoken prayers. At some point, the pastor would ask all visitors (those who were not baptized members of the church) to leave the sanctuary. The elders would guard the doors to make sure that non-members did not re-enter. The rite Holy Communion would then begin. Only baptized adult members would be admitted to the Lord's Table. Why? Was there a biblical basis for their actions? The answer is 'yes' – very much so. Let's examine the Bible for a richer understanding.

In 1st Corinthians chapter 11 we read, "*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. ²⁸ Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹ For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. ³⁰ That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.*" (ESV)

St. Paul wrote this to the church in Corinth where people were **misusing Holy Communion**. People were getting ill and weak, and others were actually dying because they were 'profaning the body and blood of the Lord.' Holy Communion is serious to God, and as a pastor and to the best of my ability, I am to ensure that people don't misuse the sacrament.

So how does someone take Communion in an unworthy manner? St. Paul tells us that we should **'examine' ourselves** – in other words, we must see ourselves as sinners standing before a righteous God. We begin our worship with Confession/Absolution in preparation for Holy Communion. We prepare our hearts by confessing that we have failed to keep God's law and are sorry for our failures. We freely acknowledge that we need what Christ is offering in this sacrament – forgiveness of sins.

Secondly, we take Communion in an **unworthy manner** when we **don't believe that Christ is truly present** in the sacrament. When we see it as a small amount of wine and a wafer of bread, and that's all, we are profaning His body and blood. This is a 'supernatural, incomprehensible' eating of Christ's body and blood – in other words – a mysterious eating that we accept by faith because God promises to deliver His body and blood. And so He does.

When, by faith, **we believe** that through this eating and drinking we receive a **pardon for our sins**, that is **exactly what we receive**. Those who don't believe this and at eat and drink anyway, bring eternal 'judgment' upon themselves. Their faithless eating means, if they die in this state, they will be in hell for eternity. From this, we may conclude that Holy Communion should be avoided, because of the potential harm. But Luther's Large Catechism states, "*We must never regard the sacrament as a harmful thing from which we should flee, but as a pure, wholesome, soothing medicine that aids you and gives life in both soul and body.*"

But there is more to Holy Communion than just what we as individual members of the Body receive in the sacrament. There is **unity and fellowship with all believers** that *we share* as we commune at the Lord's Table. And there can only be unity when we believe in the same doctrine. So how do we know what this means – believing in the 'same doctrine?' First, we say the creeds – the Apostle's Creed or the Nicene Creed prior to receiving Communion. We stand, and in unison, say what we believe. This is very important. Confirmed members of the congregation also have received instruction on the Lutheran Confessions – the creeds and other articles of faith that we hold to be true – because they are based wholly and completely on Scripture.

Our Communion Policy, printed in the bulletin for each communion worship service, states: "*Oneness at communion presupposes oneness in doctrine...*" We must **believe together** for Holy Communion to **bring us together** in faith. True fellowship is oneness with those around us at the Lord's Table. To allow other Christians that do not believe what we believe to commune with us destroys the 'oneness' and 'fellowship' that would otherwise draw us together in unity.

So why does this biblical and historical (early church) understanding and practice of 'close' communion cause so much trouble in the church today? One word: **Sin**. We read in Colossians chapter 2: "*See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. ⁹ For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, ¹⁰ and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.*" Certain Christian denominations have denied what the Bible and the early church held so dear: That **Christ's body and blood is really present**. They claim that it's only done in *remembrance of Christ*. They have lost the sacrament due to human "philosophy and empty deceit," that claims that Christ can't really be present. They practice what they refer to as 'communion', but they deny what the Bible claims: "*The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?*" (1 Cor 10:16).

They also invite everyone to commune with them. This practice is referred to as 'open communion.' Because the bread and grape juice (or wine) is not consecrated to the Lord, it is not a faithful meal that the Lord commanded His church to partake of. It's just a ritual that is done in remembrance of the Last Supper, but without expectation of forgiveness of sins or the strengthening of faith.

People from these churches come to the Lutheran church expecting to be invited to openly commune, just like their church does. In today's society that stresses **individual rights and political correctness**, the Lutheran church looks like they're practicing a form of 'elitism,' excluding other Christians from the Lord's Table. **In fact, we are protecting them from spiritual and physical harm. We are also preserving the fellowship and unity of the sacrament that brings the true church together in oneness and in shared faith. We exclude them out of love for them, and out of concern for unity in our own congregation.** Remember, in our church, consecrated bread and wine has been changed by God into the real body and blood of Christ. The bread still remains bread, and the wine still is wine, but Christ's presence is "in, with, and under" the bread and wine.

Finally, some may be confused by why we don't have fellowship with members of the **Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA)**. Remember that we stated that "*Oneness at communion presupposes oneness in doctrine.*" The ELCA church believes in the real presence of Christ, but it also does not require that one hold to the words of the Nicene Creed. In particular, you can now be a

member of an ELCA church and deny that Jesus was born of a virgin. This freedom to deny the incarnation, and **other major doctrinal differences**, prevents us from truly confessing together the creeds, and coming together in unity and oneness in body and soul. The church gives the pastor discretion to determine if non-members should be allowed to commune. Pastors usually speak to the person prior to communing, to understand if they truly know what they're doing (to protect them) and to determine if they believe in and can openly confess the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds without alteration. When someone is visiting that was a former member of the LCMS and, do to extenuating circumstances, believes what we believe, and desires to commune, pastors typically will grant them permission. This is strictly up to the pastor, and like all discretionary powers, must not be abused.

When a relative or friend from another Christian denomination visits our church, we should give thanks to our Lord, and welcome them with open arms. When they want to commune with us, we should tell them that, out of concern for them, we ask that they not commune without first speaking to the pastor. Tell them that our Communion is likely quite different from their communion, and show them our Communion Policy (printed in the bulletin). Explain that we seek **doctrinal unity** (oneness in belief) at the Lord's Table for the good of the congregation and the individual. And thank them for listening and understanding. **Our communion practice comes from the Bible and we should never apologize for how we conduct it.** You may also want to thank God that you belong to a church that holds steadfast to the truth, and will not waver, even when sinful men seek to undermine what our Lord has instituted in Holy Communion.

Pastor Travis