

Why We Practice Close(d) Communion at Redeemer Lutheran Church?

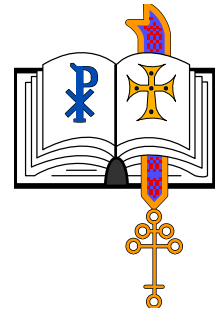
We practice "closed" communion out of genuine Christian love for unbelievers and for those believers who are not instructed as to the essence of the Lord's Supper, namely, that the true body and blood of our Lord are actually present in this Sacrament. Such people can (and do!) receive Christ's body and blood to their judgment. This is clearly taught in 1 Corinthians 11:27-30:

27 Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord.

28 But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup.

29 For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly.

30 For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep. (NASB)



What These Verses Teach

Note, first of all, in verse 27 that a person can be "guilty of the body and blood of the Lord." Also note the word "unworthily." An unworthy communicant, here, is one who is impenitent. Unbelievers are, by definition, impenitent. The thrust of this verse, then, is with regard to impenitent believers. Our Church has always taught that each communicant should examine himself (verse 28) and if he is impenitent, he should exclude himself from the Sacrament. If his pastor, however, knows (not suspects or thinks, but has proof) that the communicant is impenitent, he should, for love's sake, deny the Sacrament to this person. It is also true that, if a person doubts or does not believe that, in the Sacrament, he receives the forgiveness of sins, he is an unworthy communicant, for as Luther says, "He that does not believe these words ["Given and shed for you for the remission of sins"] or doubts, is unworthy and unprepared; for the words 'for you' require all hearts to believe."

Now look at verse 29. This verse is crystal clear. There are no ambiguities. The inspired apostle plainly teaches that, if a communicant does not discern, i.e., does not know or realize that

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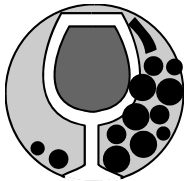
Christ's very body and blood are present in the Sacrament, he takes the Holy Supper to his own judgment. This is no small matter! To such a person, God does not impart the forgiveness of sins and the strengthening of faith, but pronounces His own judgment upon him! How serious is God's judgment? Verse 30 gives us the answer. The apostle writes, "For this cause many are weak and sickly among you and many sleep." "Sleep" is Paul's word for death. In other words, in certain cases known only to God, sickness and death are directly attributed to God's judgment upon the communicant who does not discern Christ's true body and blood in the Sacrament.

With this background, we can now see that, to give the body and blood of the Lord to anyone who wants it, would be very dangerous. Would you want to be the person responsible for giving an impenitent sinner or a believer who does not recognize Christ's real presence, the Sacrament to their judgment, to their spiritual (and, quite possibly, to their physical) harm? I would not want to do so, for it would be one of the most unloving things (indeed, one of the most hateful and wicked things!) I could do.

It is for these reasons, then, that we practice close communion. We give the Sacrament only to penitent believers and to those who understand the real presence of Christ's body and blood in, and together with, the visible elements of bread and wine. That is why we commune only members of Redeemer and those who confess the same doctrine as we confess.

Which is Correct: "Close" or "Closed" Communion?

We practice "closed" and "close" communion. There is a threefold communion in the Lord's Supper. First, those who kneel before the altar have a communion with God through faith in Christ Jesus (a communion of faith). Second, we have a sacramental communion with Christ as we receive His very body and blood for the forgiveness of sins (a sacramental communion).



At whatsoever altar you kneel, that faith you confess.

Third, we have a communion of doctrine, for those who kneel at the altar confess one and the same doctrine (a doctrinal communion). By stressing a oneness of doctrine, we mean not only that we agree on the doctrine of Christ's Real Presence in the Sacrament, but also agree with all the doctrines revealed in the Holy Scriptures as confessed by the Lutheran Church in its Confessions. The principle may be stated simply: At whatsoever altar you kneel, that faith you confess. We are, thus, "close" to God (a communion of faith), "close" to Christ (a sacramental communion), and "close" to one another (a doctrinal communion) as we come to and receive the Lord's Supper!

Is the Practice of Close(d) Communion Synod-Wide?

Officially, all congregations in the LCMS are to maintain the doctrine and practice of closed communion. This was reaffirmed at our Synodical Convention in 1986. Resolution 3-08 which was adopted at that Convention reads in part:

Whereas the Scriptures require both a knowledge of the Lord's Supper sufficient for its proper reception and a contrite heart which trusts in Jesus' Word, and Whereas, fellowship at the Lord's Table is and act of confession of faith, and . . . Whereas the practice of close communion was followed by the early church and the Lutheran Reformers and Whereas the practice of close communion seeks to prevent both harmful reception of the Sacrament as well as a profession of unity in confession in faith where this unity does not exist . . .

Resolved, that the pastors and congregations of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod continue to abide by the practice of close communion, which includes the necessity of exercising responsible pastoral care in extraordinary situations and circumstances . . .

This has been the official position of our Synod since its founding. It remains our official position toaday. It is regrettable, however, that many LCMS congregations do not practice close communion. How many? Only God knows for sure. But it is probably around one-third. This sad state of affairs surely calls for our prayers and calls upon our Synodical and District Presidents to exercise diligence to see that the Biblical doctrine be upheld. It also calls upon our faithful pastors and laymen to contend for the same thing.

What a precious gift God has given to us in the Lord's Supper! Let us pray to the Lord of the Church that we confess and practice the Holy Supper in the manner in which He instituted it.