

MYTH # 1. When we refuse Holy Communion to someone at our altar, which is a member of another Christian denomination, we are bringing into question their Christian faith.

MYTH # 2. Close Communion is a recent church practice.

MYTH #3. The pastor is not accountable for the spiritual well-being of those who commune or do not commune. He is merely to offer the sacrament to those who come forward.

MYTH #4. We are judging the hearts of people to whom we deny the Sacrament of the Altar.

MYTH #5. Members of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod are considered “worthy” of the Sacrament by right of their membership in the church body. One must “belong” but not necessarily believe.

MYTH #6. Close Communion is a loveless act of judgment and condemnation.

MYTH # 7. What everyone else at the Table of the Lord believes is not important. It is only what I believe that matters.

Introduction

The Lutheran Church Missouri Synod ((LCMS) is known in many Christian circles as a conservative church that takes the Bible seriously and seeks to preach Christ crucified. Even those who are critical of our church body nevertheless see our devotion to the Word and to the Word who became flesh. They know we are not ashamed of the Gospel.

However, there are stumbling blocks to those who observe us, even admire us, from the outside. The LCMS stands with God's Word on issues such as abortion, marriage, homosexuality, the ordination of women, and universalism. This stand causes concern from others, even from the members of our own communion. Perhaps the greatest concern is raised with the practice of Close Communion. This is a very sensitive issue facing those outside Missouri, and yes, even for those inside. "Why this practice?" they ask. "What does the Word have to say about this matter? How does it relate to our teachings on Christ?"

These are questions that must be answered plainly and directly from the Scriptures. This paper is an attempt to explain the practice of Close Communion, and to point to the Gospel as it is found in the Sacrament. We are convicted by the last will and testament of our Lord of this practice, but we need to communicate this conviction. This author writes primarily to a board of elders who often, in aiding the pastor, deal with this issue directly.

I begin where many begin, with popular misunderstandings regarding this practice, so that "I might become all things to all people". The footnotes are intended as further advancements of thought that might otherwise break up the simple flow of this paper.

"Close Communion" is the term commonly used today to describe the practice of limiting reception to the Sacrament of the Altar to those who have been instructed in the chief articles of the faith. This is a preferred term today because it stresses, in a positive way, the "closeness" of those who commune—closeness in faith, doctrine and charity. However, the early church did not use such terms as closed or close to describe their communion practice. They simply refrained from communing anyone without instruction and commitment on their part.¹

MYTH # 1. When we refuse Holy Communion to someone at our altar, who is a member of another Christian denomination, we are bringing into question their Christian faith.²

This is false. The foundation upon which the evangelical faith is built is the doctrine of justification by grace through faith alone. The Bible clearly teaches, and thus we also teach, that he who clings to the crucified Savior and looks to Him for forgiveness has eternal life and belongs to the only true Church. C.F.W. Walther said, "Making a person's salvation depend on his membership in, and communion with, the visible Orthodox Church means to overthrow the doctrine of justification by faith."

¹ The phrase "Close Communion" officially finds its first usage in an Adult Instruction Manual printed by CPH in 1938, written by George Luecke. In 1952 Donald Deffner popularized the phrase in his tract, "Why Close Communion?" Close or closed, the word "communion" can bear the greater weight of defining this practice. The word communion expresses a common union. Others refer to it as Eucharistic fellowship.

² It is assumed that all agree that the unbelieving should not receive the sacrament. The early church declared this would be "casting pearls before swine." With this refusal there is an open door to proclaim the Gospel in this supper to those who do not believe it and have not been baptized.

Note that infants are not communed at our altars yet they are considered full members of the Christian Church. They are baptized and they believe in Christ as their Savior. Thus they are children of the heavenly Father with us who commune regularly. So also any adult who is baptized and believes in Christ as his savior; they are full members of the Christian Church even though they may not commune. Holy Baptism unites us in the Christian Faith; Holy Communion unites us in the confession of that faith.³

Our reasons for the practice of Close Communion are two-fold: 1) to keep those who might partake of this sacrament to their judgment from doing so because they take it without proper “examination,” and, or without “recognizing the body of the Lord”, (cf. I Corinthians 11:26-29). 2) to have all who commune with us truly be in communion with us, that is, be one in faith, and one in the confession of that faith (cf. Acts 2:42; I Corinthians 10:16-18).

MYTH # 2. Close Communion is a recent church practice.

Close Communion dates back to the time of the early church. It is Open Communion that is the recent church practice.

The church father Origin, (b 185 A.D.) once drew a comparison between the Christians and the philosophers of his day whom anybody could attend and listen to. “The Christians,” he said, “on the contrary test every man first and instruct him privately until he gives demonstration of trustworthiness and an orderly life. Only then is he admitted to their assembly as a ‘hearer.’ This goes only for the Service of the Word.”

In the early church these hearers were then dismissed before the celebration of Holy Communion. Also, the catechumens, even though they were making progress toward being received as communicate members, were dismissed. During the Sacrament of the Altar the doors of the assembly were closed and were guarded by deacons and sub deacons. (Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries, Werner Elert, p. 75).

Before a guest in the early church could be admitted to the inner communion of the local congregation, two requirements had to be met: 1. He had to have on his person some proof that he belonged to a Christian church; and 2. The church to which he belonged had to be orthodox. The Council of Carthage in the middle of the 4th century declared that no admittance to communion should be granted without a letter from one’s bishop. This explains the practice of “letters of transfer” today. Why else do we send such letters of transfer other than to show that those mentioned are ready to be received as communicant members of another congregation?

Polycarp, Justin Martyr, the Didache, the Clementine liturgy, and other church documents and writers from the first century A.D. all speak of closed communion and practiced it. If anything is evident from a study of the early church it is that they considered the Sacrament of the Altar to be something of serious moment and consequence. Elert says of that time, “The modern theory that anybody may be admitted as a guest to the sacrament in a church of differing confession, that people may communicate to and fro in spite of the absence of full church fellowship is unknown in the early church, indeed unthinkable.” (Elert, p. 175).

³ When excluding members of another confession from the sacrament of Holy Communion we are not placing them under church discipline. We are being honest about where we are at in our confession of Christ and his salvation offered in the means of grace, and we are calling them to be honest about where they are at in their confession of Christ and his salvation offered in the means of grace. Rightly speaking, the suspension can only be removed by them, not us. They, not us, impose it.

Open Communion⁴ was forced upon the Lutherans in Germany in 1817 as a result of the Prussian Union. Emperor Frederick William III ordered the Lutherans to admit to their altars Reformed Christians even though their teachers stoutly denied the real presence of Christ in the Sacrament. The Lutheran State Churches in Germany continued the historic practices of close communion but suffered political consequences. This was especially true of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, or the Old Lutheran Church.⁵

Among early Lutheran's in America open communion practices spread, but in 1875 the General Council adopted the Galesburg Rule, which turned back this general trend. It stated: "I. Lutheran pulpits are for Lutheran ministers only. Lutheran altars are for Lutheran communicates only. II. The exceptions to the rule belong to the sphere of privilege, not right. III. The determination of the exceptions is to be made in consonance with these principles by the conscientious judgment of pastors, as the cases arise."

The predecessor bodies of both the LCA and ALC officially kept this rule. The constitution of the old American Lutheran Church (1930) contains this statement: "The Synod regards unity in doctrine and practice the necessary prerequisite for church fellowship, and therefore adheres to the rule, 'Lutheran pulpits for Lutherans only,' and rejects unionism in all its forms."

The 1991 edition of the small catechism published by Concordia Publishing House for the Missouri Synod teaches close communion. On page 240 the question is answered: The Sacrament must not be given to the following: A. Those who are openly ungodly and unrepentant; B. Those of a different confession of faith, since the Lord's Supper is a testimony of the unity of the faith; C. Those who are unable to examine themselves; D. Those who are unable to examine themselves, such as infants and people who have not received proper instruction, or the unconscious.

MYTH #3. The pastor is not accountable for the spiritual well-being of those who commune or do not commune. He is merely to offer the sacrament to those who come forward.

A pastor is called to "preach the word, and administer the sacraments." This is what is stated in the call document. Now to administer means more than to offer. It means to be accountable, responsible, for what is offered. For example, to administer a government program such as welfare is not simply to hand out the taxpayer's money to whoever requests it. It is to be given with discretion and careful concern. So also, the pastor is to use discretion in administering the sacrament, for his charge is to "keep watch over all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made him overseer (bishop)" (Acts 20:28). The pastor is not to play the role of the

⁴ Four different "open" communion practices can be distinguished in contemporary practices; 1) For all who come forward, without any personal knowledge of who may come forward. 2) For all who are baptized and believe. (This may include infants, as is the case with the ELCIC.) 3) For all who believe in the real presence of Christ in the sacrament. 4) For all who publicly confess the doctrine of salvation in all its articles together with the members of that congregation or synod. In the fullest sense of the word only the first is an open communion. The others all have some degree of closure.

⁵ The central disagreement between the Reformed and Lutheran positions on the Lord's Supper is much deeper than a disagreement on the doctrine of the real presence. The central disagreement is on the doctrine of the incarnation. The major argument advanced by the Reformed in denying the real presence was that the "finite cannot contain the infinite; (finitum non capax infiniti); that is, finite bread can never contain the body of the infinite Christ. Lutherans however teach the full communion of God and man in Christ Jesus at His birth, that the body of Jesus did contain the second person of the Trinity, and still does to this day. Luther later wrote, "He whom the world could not enclose doth in Mary's lap repose."

savior, for the Lord is the host, but neither is he to play “hooky in the kitchen,” for he is the appointed “steward of the mystery” (I Corinthians 4:1).

Consider the doctrine of the call. Pastors are not hired by the congregation to be their caregiver of souls, but they are called by the Holy Spirit through a congregation (cf. Acts 20:28). Thus they are accountable not only to the congregation but also to the Holy Spirit. Thus it is written: “Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly” (James 3:1). And again, “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account” (Hebrews 13:7).⁶

These Scriptures do not grant the presiding minister a license to act according to his own whims, either in abusing his commission, or in not caring for his charge. The ordained minister is a bondservant of Christ, a “called servant of the Word.” Any pastor who acts contrary to the Word will be brought into judgment by the Chief Shepherd (I Peter 5:2-4). Therefore he will act accordingly as one accountable to those who come under his administration.

Perhaps a crisis in pastoral ministry, and consequently in the Sacrament of the Altar, is that pastors do not intimately know the Christian faith of those who commune, not even the faith of those given specifically into their supervision. In some cases a pastoral conversation about one’s personal faith in the Lord Jesus, or questions about one’s knowledge about doctrine seem out of place, if not even rude and offensive to some. A high mobile and secular society has created a disconnected between pastoral care and individual Christians.

Within such a cultural context congregations need to redouble their efforts to encourage their pastors to know their people on a spiritual level. A pastor should know the faith of his people. That should be his first and foremost concern, that they know the Lord Jesus, trust in him for salvation alone, and rightfully receive him who comes to us in his body and blood. This also is the joy of the ministry!

MYTH #4. We are judging the hearts of people to whom we deny the Sacrament of the Altar.

We cannot judge the inner thoughts, beliefs and attitudes of people; only the Spirit who “searches all things” can do this (I Corinthians 2:10). We judge the confession of the lip, not the faith of the heart. We listen to what people say of their faith, and not what we can see of their faith in their heart. If someone confesses they are a members of the Methodist Church and they wish to commune with us we must assume their heart is also in the Methodist Church and that they truly believe that the words of Christ, “This represents my body... This symbolizes my blood.” They may indeed, in their hearts, believe in the real presences, simply trusting these incredible words to be true, but we must make more of their confession than of our ability to read their hearts. We must stake everything on what they say and do, and nothing on what we think or hope they may believe.⁷

⁶ Luther taught that the pastor is accountable for those who commune at the altar. In the following quote note not only his teaching regarding the supper, but his condemnation of the pastors involved: “It terrifies me to hear that in one and the same church or at one and the same altar both parties are to find and to receive one and the same Sacrament and one party is to believe that it receives nothing but bread and wine, while the other is to believe that it receives the true body and blood of Christ. And I often wonder whether it is credible that a preacher or shepherd of souls can be so hardened and malicious as to say nothing about this and to let both parties go on in this way, receiving one and the same sacrament, everyone according to his own faith, etc. If such a person exists, he must have a heart harder than any stone, steel, or adamant; he must in fact, be an apostle of wrath” (Ewald M. Pless, *What Luther Says*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959, 2:813).

⁷ This word “confession” is not to be confused with confession of sins, or guilt. Here it is used in conjunction with Matthew 10:32 and Romans 10:9-10. Jesus said, whoever confesses me before men, I will confess him before my Father in heaven.” And Paul writes, “If

The same is true of our own members whose hearts we also do not know. Luther said, “If someone does not confess something about which I have suspicions, I should diligently question him. But if he denies everything, I must make more of his denial than of my conjectures, and if he insists on it, I must also administer the Sacrament also to Judas, the traitor, but to his perdition.” (What Luther Says, p. 810).

In this same vein we must not over burden pastors with a sense of accountability that exceeds the Chief Shepherd’s expectations. The watchman is commanded to sound the warning in the hearing of all (Ezekiel 3:17-19) not go about seeking to save people who reject that warning. Confirmation does allow for private inquiry, but beyond this we must make more of what individuals say and do. If communicants will not heed a public warning, and they drink to their own judgment, the pastor will be “innocent of the blood of all men” (Acts 20:26).⁸

MYTH #5. Members of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod are considered “worthy” of the Sacrament by right of their membership in the church body. One must “belong” but not necessarily believe.

Close Communion does not give automatic admission to those who belong to the fellowship of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. A member of the synod may be denied Holy Communion for reasons of impenitence, or because of an offense they have given which they have not removed. Church discipline does call for denying fellowship [Common-union] at the altar because individuals under our spiritual care refuse to repent of their transgression against God’s Law, and they continue in their rebellion against Him.

Also, there may be those in the LCMS who take Holy Communion to their own judgment because they have privately fallen away. Yet because they pretend to be Christian, because they still confess faith in Christ before others, and seemingly do Christian works, this individual continues to receive the sacrament to his eternal harm. We cannot manage such a situation. God alone knows the heart.

In cases of emergencies, and in pastoral concern for those who fall under the congregation’s care, the sacrament may be given to those outside our communicant membership. Here the “steward of the mysteries” (I Corinthians 4:1) must determine in his sanctified judgment, after careful dialogue, what is best for the individual, and what can still maintain the integrity of the our public confession of the Gospel. Certainly latitude should be given when people knowingly place themselves in our extended pastoral care, and when movement and intention has been given to join our fellowship.⁹

you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.” Faith in the heart is known only to God, but when it is confessed upon the lip, it can be known by all.

⁸ Luther says, “This is not the responsibility of the minister. His responsibility is only to offer the man the true Word and the true sacrament. But I am not worried about whether he truly believes. I serve him because of the confession, which I hear, may the condition of his heart be whatever it please. I stake a hundred souls upon it that the absolution and Sacrament are right. I must believe him when he tells me that he is penitent. If he is deceiving me, he is deceiving himself. The Sacrament and absolution are nonetheless true. If I gave someone ten florins and he considered them only counterfeit—there the money lies before his eyes; if he does not properly evaluate it, the guilt and the loss are his.” Luther also said, “I hold that it is enough that he who desires to be communed be questioned be so understanding that the need be explored only once in his life or not at all.” (Plass, 2:810)

⁹ Francis Pieper said, “Christian congregations, and their public servants, are only the administrators and not the lords of the Sacrament. The Lord’s Supper is not their institution, but Christ’s. Therefore they must follow Christ’s instructions in administering the Sacrament. On the one hand, they are not permitted to introduce ‘Open Communion’; on the other hand, they must guard against

It should be joyfully noted there are other Church bodies in other countries with which our synod is in altar and pulpit fellowship with because we both confess with one mind and one voice the Gospel in all its articles.

MYTH #6. Close Communion is a loveless act of judgment and condemnation.

It is true that many today are offended by this communion practice, and we should deal with those who have been offended in an evangelical manner, that is , explaining ourselves in light of the message of salvation in Christ alone. However, to judge those who practice close communion as loveless people is judgmental in itself. So this argument of who is being judgmental may run a vicious circle! There may be that pastor who truly enjoys refusing the Holy Sacrament to those who desire it, thus causing them embarrassment and pain. But such a caricature exists in our imagination. Pastors and congregations who practice close communion do so out of a great love for souls and in faithful obedience to the Lord's last will and testament. It is the Lord's Supper, not the Christian's. We do not prepare the meal, nor send the invitations. We only serve it as stewards of the mystery. If we find the supper will prove poisonous to someone who, for example, cannot "examine himself," or does not "recognize the body of the Lord," (I Corinthians 11:27, 29) even if they have relatives who are sensitive members of the congregation (cf. Matthew 10:37), pastors still need to be good stewards of the mystery.¹⁰

It would be much easier to simply allow anyone to come to commune at our altars. Pastors would then be liberated from conscientious charge of administering the sacrament. Trained ushers would no longer need to inquire about the faith of those who commune, nor get their names. The people in the pews would only concern themselves with their own personal faith and not the faith of others. But what is easiest seldom brings glory to God.

Actually, if a congregation and its public servants were to practice close communion as laid out in the Scriptures, compassionate ministry of souls would ensue. Their Christian pastors and elders too, would take a serious interest in the spiritual welfare of their charge, and all who visit the communion table. Great interest would be shown in the confession of the Gospel as it is understood and proclaimed. The rite of confirmation

denying the Sacrament to those Christians for whom Christ has appointed it... Both pastor and congregation must most carefully guard against denying the Lord's Supper to anyone to whom Christ wants it to be given. In his day Luther had to warn not only against laxity in practice, but also against legalism and unnecessary rigor." (Dogmatics, III, p. 381, 386)

¹⁰ On occasion it is argued that the context of Paul's words in I Corinthians 12 regarding the "body of Christ" and the theme of harmony and unity (I Cor. 1:10-17) should be imported to Paul's words concerning the Lord's Supper and "discerning the body of the Lord." Hence we should discern not the real presence, but the church. We should only be concerned with those who commune that they have personal faith, and not necessarily confess that faith with us. (Of course, this raises a cumbersome question: How does one discern the church other than by its confession? Surely we cannot discern the church that is the invisible church. Only God knows the heart.)

This interpretation would be worthy of greater consideration if the Spirit had moved the hand of Paul to sue the popular phrase "body of Christ." Thus we would be diverted more from the words of Christ (vs. 23-26) to Paul's words in chapter 12. This phrase—body of Christ—is used 6 times in the Bible to refer to the family of all believers. (Yet even the phrase "body of Christ" as used in Romans 7:4 may refer to the physical flesh of Jesus). Some inference cannot be denied however, especially when taken in light of 10:17 & 11:19 of I Corinthians, which points us to the visible church (the faith confessed) and the unity of faith expressed there. Right from the outset Paul calls upon the saints at Corinth to all "speak the same thing" (I Cor 1:10). No one is a church unto himself. Surely both understandings of the body are present here by the immediate and then also the broader context of I Corinthians.

would become a rite of serious consequence for pastors would seek to be convinced that the confirmands were indeed prepared to dine with the Lord in true repentance and faith and unity with fellow confessors. The celebration of the sacrament would also be elevated to a higher plain, for the Holy Supper would be seen as an event of serious consequence and blessing. The slogan of this congregation would be: Close Communion because we care.

MYTH # 7. What everyone else at the Table of the Lord believes is not important. It is only what I believe that matters.

Holy Communion according to Holy Scripture is a very public matter. It involves my standing with Christ my savior and my standing with those who gather with me at the altar of the Lord.

It is written: “Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf. Consider the people of Israel: Do not those who eat the sacrifice participate in the altar?” (I Corinthians 10:16-18).

“They continued steadfast in the apostles’ doctrine, then breaking of bread and in prayer” (Acts 2:42).

“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).

The above Scriptures point out the two-fold nature of Holy Communion. An illustration of this is the arms of the cross, which extend upward and outward. Not only are we in communion with the Divine, but also with those about us who gather at the altar of the Lord, for we who are many are one body in this Sacrament. That is why the Sacrament is called a Holy Communion—a Holy Community. We confess union with Christ and with one another as we go to the table of the Lord. And our unity is based not only on a common faith and a common love for each other, which Matthew 5:23-24¹¹ anticipates in this matter, but also on a common confession of that faith. As the hymn writers says, “...one in hope and doctrine, one in charity” (Onward Christian Soldiers).

All Christians are one in Christ whether they like it or not! That unity is given by right of Holy Baptism and faith found in the heart (cf. Galatians 3:25-29; Eph. 4:3-6). Holy Communion, on the other hand, expresses a unity of faith that is confessed on the lip. We “participate in the altar” (I Cor. 1:18), that is, we fellowship with the doctrines that are taught, preached, and practiced among these people. In short, we say, “Amen” to the sermon when we commune.¹²

¹¹ The early church strictly enforced a oneness not only in doctrine but also in love with those who communed. The “kiss of peace” mentioned in the Scriptures demonstrated this harmony of hearts before the supper. After the “hearers” and catechumens were dismissed the elder would say: “The holy apostle of our Lord writes, ‘Let a man examine himself and so let him eat of that bread and drink of that cup, for whoever eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment upon himself.’ Therefore let all who come to this holy supper give attention to the Word of God. If there is anyone who is impenitent, let him not come. If there is any who is unwilling to forsake his sin, let him not come. If there is any who are unforgiving, let him first forgive, as he desires to be forgiven. If there are any who are unreconciled, let them first be reconciled. If there is any who does not receive the Scriptures of God, let him depart.”

¹² For communicate membership in our synod the question put to new members embodies what we consider the Gospel confessed in all its articles. The question asked in the Lutheran Agenda is: “Do you accept and confess that the teachings of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, as you have learned to know them [from the Small Catechism], are faithful and true to the Word of God?”

Paul’s prayer for believers as they congregate is that they “be like-minded one toward another according to Christ Jesus: That you may with one mind, and with one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 15:6; cf. I Corinthians 1:10). If each of us who communes has a different confession of faith—one confesses that the Word is verbally inspired; another questions that inspiration; one confesses Christ as the only way of salvation, another confesses Christ as one of many ways—how then can we pretend that we are in communion with one another? Yes, all people are different, and none will agree in all things, but are there different Gospels? Yes, there will always be division in humanity, but is God’s Word divided? Are we to agree with each other, or with the Gospel Christ has given for the world’s salvation? Holy Communion celebrates holy people who with one mouth confess the doctrine of salvation in Christ and the means of grace alone.¹³

CONCLUSION

One point that needs to be stressed in our discussions concerning close communion is the purpose of close communion. People generally know what close communion is, and how it is done, but not necessarily why. The CTCR put it best when it said, “The practice of refusing communion to certain Christians and the general population at Lutheran altars is called close communion. This practice serves the Gospel, and even those refused, by its reverence for our Lord’s last will and testament” (Theology and Practice of the Lord’s Supper, CTCR, p. 21)

When we say close communion is to serve the Gospel we are saying it is to help preserve the Gospel from error, and to advance the Gospel in mission. The purpose of close communion has the Gospel at heart. That is why we seek to explain this practice so that people may see the precious Gospel of salvation at stake.

Often the teaching of close communion is perceived as an office of the law, a legalistic elitism that grants communion only to those deemed worthy of the sacrament. But nothing can be farther from our Lord’s intention in His last will and testament. In this supper Christ bequeaths to His children the forgiveness of sins, and seals this to us in the pledge of His body and blood. To receive this pledge we must confess our unworthiness, and our total dependence upon Christ who comes to us in His body and blood for our life and salvation. We would invite others to do the same.

It is this very confession we wish to preserve and advance, for therein is the very article of the Gospel. When we deny the Supper to those who deny this confession, or the real presence of Christ in the Sacrament, or even the inspiration of the Scriptures, we do embrace it. We “contend for the faith once and for all delivered to the saints.” (Jude 3)¹⁴

¹³ “Close communion seeks to prevent a profession of confessional unity in faith where there is in fact, disunity and disagreement” (Theology and Practice of the Lord’s Supper, Commission on Theology and Church Relations, 1983, p.21). Dr. Ralph Bohlmann, in the August 1988 Lutheran Witness, wrote, “To be sure, the primary purpose of the Lord’s Supper is that individual Christians will receive the body and blood of our Lord for their forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. But in the Sacrament, we commune not only as individuals, but as the family of God. The apostle Paul stresses this fact in I Corinthians 11 when he reminds Christians that in eating and drinking the Lord’s body and blood, “you [plural] are proclaiming the death of the Lord until He comes” (vs. 29). We who commune together make a corporate proclamation; we preach the Gospel together. That corporate act presupposes that we share a common faith and confession.”

¹⁴ Herman Sasse has keenly noted: “Every disease of the church becomes manifest at the Lord’s Table. The schisms and heresies, for instance, against which Paul had to fight in the church of Corinth seem to have become noticeable first in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. . . . Each misunderstanding of the Gospel must needs lead to a misunderstanding of the Sacrament; each misunderstanding of

A verse of Scripture is helpful in this tension. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians: “If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother” (II Thessalonians 3:14, 15).¹⁵

No we cannot guard against how our actions are perceived, for even the Gospel becomes a law to those who reject Christ. No, we cannot remove the shame and embarrassment experienced by those denied the Sacrament, for this very shame is the instrument of evangelical witness. However, when our own people misunderstand, or when those who are denied the supper are then dismissed from the service without a word of explanation, without an evangelical witness, close communion hardly serves its purpose.

Here at this point there should be a plea for compassion and understanding for those who are denied the Supper at our altars. There is a tremendous lack of denominational loyalty, or doctrinal discernment these days. People are interested in believing, but not in belonging to a congregation, let alone some confession of faith. Therefore many are either ignorant of doctrine, or have little motivation to learn and study scripture. But we should be willing to “become all things to all people in order to win some” (I Corinthians 9:22). We should be prepared to give an answer for the hope that we have, but ‘in gentleness and respect’ (I Peter 3:15).

Many Christians have a human view of the sacrament, viewing it simply as an ordinance and not a means of grace. They think, “It is something we are just supposed to do.” Many Christians also would no doubt reject the false teachings of their churches, and rejoice in our preaching of pure grace in Christ, if given the contentions clearly in Scripture. The 200 men who aided Absalom’s conspiracy went along “quite innocently, knowing nothing of the matter” (II Samuel 15:11). Likewise today, many follow in the confession of false teachings “quite innocently, knowing nothing of the matter.”¹⁶

Similarly, when there are Christians who, of their own conviction and conscience, disagree with our teaching, holding to false doctrine in some articles of the Gospel, yet also clinging to Christ for salvation, we should not fail to recognize the doctrine of the Church. We should respect their own convictions, even as we ask them to respect ours. We should not regard them as enemies, but “warn them as brothers” (I Thessalonians 3:15).¹⁷

the Sacrament is bound to lead to a wrong concept of the Gospel. If this rule applies to the church even in the apostolic age, we shall not be surprised to see the controversies over the Lord’s Supper like the controversies over the Gospel, accompany the entire history of the church.” (Herman Sasse, *This is My Body*, Adelaide, South Australia; Lutheran Publishing House 1977 p. 2-3)

¹⁵ It is worth noting the words of Scripture being disobeyed in this context were not words concerning justification but holy living—“never tire of doing what is right” (vs 23). All articles of doctrine were important to the apostles, even those outside the chief article. As Jesus commanded, “. . .teaching them to obey all things whatsoever I have commanded you” (Matthew 18:20).

¹⁶ The Formula of Concord takes into consideration the ignorance of those who follow false teachers saying, “As to the condemnations, censures, and rejections of godless doctrines, and especially of that which has arisen concerning the Lord’s Supper . . . it is in no way our design and purpose to condemn those men who err from a certain simplicity of mind, but are not blasphemers against the truth of the heavenly doctrine, much less, indeed, entire churches.

¹⁷ Walther’s words spoken to the Iowa District convention in 1879 seem fitting here: “The true distinguishing mark of a sectarian group is that the pastor primarily tries to bind the people to himself or to the small communion of which he is a member, whereas he should join John the Baptist in saying, ‘He must increase, but I must decrease,’ John 3:30. We have succeeded only if our congregations and pastors remain faithful to us because they realize that we have the pure, sweet, blessed and saving gospel in all its truth and purity, Any pastor whose only intention is fanaticizing his members for the Lutheran Church, for the Missouri Synod, or

even worse, for the Iowa District, is not a true pastor. Such men are poor pastors. Pastors must direct people to Christ and say, 'you see, we proclaim the pure Word of God, which contains the eternal Gospel. That is why you must cling to us, and that is why we

In Holy Baptism we are made one in faith, and in Holy Communion we declare ourselves one in the confession of that faith. Both of the sacraments are ecumenical in their own way. The first calls us to remember that we are one in faith and the salvation that Christ brings; the second calls us to be one in the articulation of that faith to the world. As the apostles wrote, “For as oft as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” (I Corinthians 11:28).

Thus standing between the two advents of Christ, between His coming at Christmas and His coming at the end of the world, we boldly seek to preach Christ crucified to the whole world, not compromising the sweetness of that message to any new teaching, so that all in all “Christ might have the preeminence,” and all might know that we are truly saved by grace through faith alone.

...maintain, the moment we no longer do that, you should leave us! For salvation is not in any way dependent on us, nor on the Missouri Synod. So, if the Missouri Synod does not proclaim the pure Word of God, it is worthless, and you should leave it.” C.F.W. Walther, “Duties of an Evangelical Lutheran Synod,” 1879.