

(Closed Communion)

By  
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To begin this paper, I deem it necessary to break formality and be personal in nature at times. I have wavered in multiple directions on this particular question or doctrine.[1] When growing up, my pastor stood strong in “closed communion”. At the time, I thought my pastor was just being mean-spirited or high-browed.[2]

My mother, who was a member of an ELCA congregation was not permitted to take the Lord’s Supper. I thought who is my pastor to forbid that right. At points in my life I would believe he is right, than I would waver the other direction. Towards the end of my time at Concordia University-Wisconsin, I strongly stood with the doctrine of Closed Communion.

Then I arrived at Concordia Seminary. In my first quarter during a class I heard a professor give the following analogy:

A man comes into your office a half-hour before church starts. He is under church discipline from the pastor of his congregation. This man has come to your church, told his side of the story, and it appears as though the pastor of his congregation is just being a jerk. What would you do? Our professor asked us. Would you let him take communion that morning without having spoken to the other pastor. The answer, “Err on the side of grace”.

You may do wrong, but don’t worry God will forgive you. This answer really bothered me. Is this the reason that we practice Closed Communion? Is it simply so that we don’t accidentally sin against our brother?

In the course of this paper, I will discuss the doctrinal defense for the practice of closed communion. I will look at scripture, the Lutheran Confessions, church fathers, and others in defense of the doctrine. Laxity in regards to this doctrine will in the end appear to be unacceptable.

1. SCRIPTURE PROOF

1 Corinthians 10:16-21

*“16 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? 17 Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. 18 Consider the people of Israel: are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar? 19 What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? 20 No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. 21 You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.”[3]*

First let me note that there is a slight weakness in the translation. The word translated as “participation” can be a little misleading. It sounds quite every day. A participation in the blood/body of Christ weakens the sense of the event. The Greek word *κοινωνία* has a very strong connection to community. It is translated as “communion, assembly, joint participation, intercourse, intimacy”. Now,

as a quick note, the removal of “joint” from participation in the ESV’s translation (and most translations) takes away the community aspect of the Lord’s Supper.

Therefore, it is of utmost importance to understand that the Lord’s Supper was understood as communal. The connection of intimacy is of even greater interest. This suggests that the better way to understand the Lord’s Supper is not simply as a meal between friends. Rather it is a meal that is between family. It has a very strong connection to marriage.

Therefore Paul is insisting that the table where commune, that is where your allegiance lies. To commune at another table is practically adultery. Now, 1 Corinthians 10 may more address differences in religions, however it doesn’t cover denominations.[4] There may be some cause in saying that, but the establishment of a communal element to the Lord’s Supper is very important.

1 Corinthians 11:17-22

*“17But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. 18For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, 19for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. 20When you come together, it is not the Lord’s supper that you eat. 21For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. 22What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not.”*

Paul returns to the concern of divisions, especially within the context of the Lord’s Supper. However, the division is not of religions. Rather it is different Christians partaking of the supper in division.

They are not partaking of different meals. Some are indeed coming for the purpose of the Lord’s Supper. Others, however are using it as opportunities to feed up on food and wine. The very purpose for which they gather is different. Furthermore there was greed and sinfulness that existed which Paul strongly disliked. He saw them as despising the church of God and practicing humiliation of those who have nothing.

1 Corinthians 11:27-32

*“27 Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning 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. 29For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. 30That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. 31 But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. 32But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.”*

Continuing on, Paul warns against eating and drinking in an unworthy manner. He then proceeds to explain how this can be done. Quite specifically whoever eats and drinks without discerning the body. What exactly does that mean?

The CTCR document on the Lord's Supper makes the claim that it is talking about the body within the Lord's Supper. Especially on the basis of the context. In the immediate context, the body was just mentioned within relation to the body of the Lord. Therefore, the CTCR definitely is accurate in that regards. However, I believe the context to be a double entendre.

In 1 Corinthians 12:12-31, the body of Christ is the fellowship of believers. Therefore it may indeed be that Paul is referring to both images concerning the body. The overall context of 1 Corinthians is addressing divisions within the church.

Therefore, it should be seen that denial of the real presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper and the denial of the body of Christ amongst those gathered, brings about judgment. Therefore, when one denies the communion whether it be in doctrine or open sin or pride or selfishness, one brings about judgement. When one denies that the body is indeed present they bring about judgement. It is for this reason that some have become sick and fallen asleep.

Therefore in regards to the sacrament, diligence should be indeed practiced. If indeed partaking of it unworthily can be harmful to the individual we should seriously consider who we do and do not admit to the table.

## 2. WITNESSES OF THE CHURCH IN ITS OFFICIAL CONFESSIONS

In the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod there are three common practices in regards to the Lord's Supper. There are those who practice "open communion"[5], "close communion"[6], and "closed communion"[7]. The question I guess should be asked which one is of best practice. When I myself have entered into the parish which will I practice.

***Faith in these words: "Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins."***

*Who receives this sacrament worthily?*

*Fasting and bodily preparation are certainly fine outward training. But that person is truly worthy and well prepared who has faith in these words: "Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." But anyone who does not believe these words or doubts them is unworthy and unprepared for the words "for you" require all hearts to believe.[8]*

At times the Confessions appear to support Open or Close Communion. These words above, at face value only seem to demand belief in Christ or the forgiveness of Sins. One doesn't even have to believe that the body and blood is present in the above portion of the Small Catechism as it appears.

*"Because this is a sacrament of the New Testament, as Christ clearly says, communicants therefore ought to be confident that they are being offered what is promised in the New Testament, namely, the free forgiveness of sins."[9]*

The Apology only appears to reaffirm the concerns of the Small Catechism. It still seems to suggest some brand of open communion. It demands faith in Christ, but nothing about desiring the same belief at the Lord's Supper.

***Obstinate sinners should not be admitted***

*“obstinate sinners should not be admitted to the sacrament or other fellowship in the church until they improve their behavior and avoid sin.”[10]*

*“Those who are impudent and unruly ought to be told to stay away, for they are not ready to receive forgiveness of sins because they do not desire it and do not want to be righteous.”[11]*

There is not as much disagreement amongst Christians as to the belief that those who are in unrepentant sin should be withheld from the Supper. Granted there is truth that pastors/congregations are less willing to enforce it, they do indeed practice and believe it. Paul is quite clear of such a practice in 1 Corinthians. It was the sin of greed and lack of concern for others that lead to the discussion of communing unworthily.

*“We believe, teach, and confess that only those who truly believe and are worthy, but also the unworthy and unbelievers receive the true body and blood of Christ, though they do not receive life and comfort, but rather judgement and damnation, if they do not turn and repent.”[12]*

Still this reaffirms the practice of open communion it appears, or the popular practice of close communion. It recognizes that communing someone unworthily is done to their harm. They receive neither life and comfort, but rather judgement and damnation.

*“(The Catechism) It contains what every Christian should know. Anyone who does not know it should not be numbered among Christians nor admitted to any sacrament.”[13]*

*“Those who do not want to learn these things must be told how they deny Christ and are not Christians should also not be admitted to the sacrament, should not be sponsors for children at and baptism, and should not exercise any aspect of Christian freedom.”[14]*

So, are they right? Is the sacrament best administered to anyone as long as they are a Christian? Is this really what is being said in the Confessions? The answer is no. Remember when Luther asks who receives the sacrament worthily, it is understood that the Christian has already knows of the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Sacrament of Baptism. They also know of what is in the Sacrament.

Therefore, the above statements from the preface of both catechisms are indeed valid. Luther demands that one know the Catechism. Why? Perhaps it is the simple reality that Luther understands that this too is unrepentant sin.

### 3. WITNESSES OF THE CHURCH IN THE WRITINGS OF ITS TEACHERS

If there is any doubt that Luther was opposed to communing those of different confessions, the following selection should change that belief:

#### **Martin Luther**

*“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 and and the same sacrament, everyone according to his own faith, etc. If such a person exists he must have heart harder than any stone, steel or adamant; he must, in fact be an apostle of wrath.... Whoever, therefore, has such preachers or suspects them to be such, let him be warned against them as against the devil incarnate himself.”[15]*

Some more thoughts from those whom teach the faith:

**C. F. W. Walther**

*Holy Communion is a mark of confession of Faith and Doctrine among those who celebrate together. Therefore the admission of members of heterodox fellowships to the celebration of communion within the Lutheran Church is in conflict with: 1. Christ’s institution: 2. The commanded unity of the church in faith and accordingly in confession. 3. Our love for those to whom the Sacrament is administered. 4. Our love for our own fellow believers, especially the weak who by this action would be given serious offense; and 5. The command not to become participants in the sin and err or of others.”[16]*

**Francis Pieper**

*“(open communion) it leads the neighbor to sin by partaking unworthily of the sacrament”[17]*

**John Calvin**

*“And here also we must preserve the order of the Lord’s Supper that it may not be profaned by being administered indiscriminately. For it is very true that he to whom its distribution has been committed, if he knowingly and willingly admits and unworthy person whom he could rightfully turn away is as guilty of sacrilege as if he had cast the Lord’s body to the dogs....Therefore lest this most hallowed mystery be disgraced, discretion is very much needed in its distribution.”[18] [19]*

**Martin Chemnitz**

*“Christ did not make a twofold institution of His Supper, one for the worthy and another for the unworthy, so that to Peter the words indeed mean: “Take, eat; this is My body,” but to Judas the words are different, namely: “Take, eat; this is only plain bread.” But he says in general to all who come to the Supper: “Take, eat; this is my body.”[20]*

**Justin Martyr**

*“And this food is called among us the Eucharist, of which no one is allowed to partake but the man who believes that the things which we teach are true, and who has been washed with the washing that is for the remission of sins, and unto regeneration, and who is so living as Christ has enjoined.”[21] [22]*

4. WHAT TO DO?

Then what is one to do? Is it merely a question of erring on the side of grace? Should we withhold the sacrament of one who is another confession even when a church of their confession is far off? Should we practice close or closed communion?

Lets address that last question first. The term closed communion finds its roots in the early church. The term itself is distinctly Lutheran. “Close Communion” finds its origin from American Baptists. It

however, seems to be a meaningless term. "Close Communion"? As opposed to what? There is no such thing as far communion.

I do realize that this particular writing flies in the face against what the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod has decreed. It decided in the 1980's that we practice "close" communion. The big problem is that how this term has come to be defined in the LCMS is functionally open communion and ignores the warnings which Paul, the Confessions, and other teachers of the faith have warned against.

In the mid-1990's the LCMS decided that the practice is Close(d) communion. There are those in the Synod even in the Seminaries who emphatically stand behind this. However, given the trends of the church, terminology is important. The historic practice of closed communion is more beneficial.

Closed communion originates from the ancient church. In the earliest days of the church the Lord's Supper was the most protected point of the service. The service was in fact divided between the Liturgy of the Catechumens and Liturgy of the Faithful.

This historic practice is reflected still in Divine Liturgies of the Eastern Orthodox churches. Prior to the confession of faith, the priest says, "The Doors! The Doors! In wisdom let us attend!"

Prior to saying this, all those who have not been confirmed in the faith were asked to leave the church and go elsewhere for the purpose of instruction. Then the church proceeded to say the Nicene Creed. This confession existed as evidence of who did and did not belong in the sanctuary for the Supper.

It is from this that the term closed communion comes, because they literally closed the doors. In the modern practice of closed communion, the unconfirmed attendees may stay behind. However, the idea remains the same.

Only those who are of the same confession are to commune. In the example at the beginning, communing the individual under church discipline is not an issue of erring on the side of grace. It may be indeed detrimental to the individual. It brings about judgement and at times sickness and death.

How dare a pastor take that risk? They appear to be as Luther termed it "Apostles of Wrath". It must be remembered that denial of the supper is not excommunication from the faith. They are indeed separate issues. One is not condemned to hell if they don't partake of the supper. Therefore, in the case as at the start of this essay, what should be done?

The pastor should tell him, "I'm sorry, I can't commune you until I know more. This does not mean you are outside of the faith. However, I would be delighted to give you absolution at this moment." To err on the side of Grace ignores weight of the concern in communion fellowship.

Beyond this the pastor should ask that his communicants know what he is taking, why he is taking it. The Communicant should know the commandments, the creed, the Lord's Prayer, all of which goes into the question of "what he is taking and why he is taking it".

Now indeed a pastor should go about this practice tactfully. He should teach the congregation. Don't take for granted that they know the reasons. Making announcements at every service eases the difficulty, as well as meeting with visitors.

Many pastors have made the practice of inviting non-Lutherans to the rail. When they come up the pastor asks them to cross their arms as to receive a blessing. This seems to be a good way of not making the member feel overly at odds sitting in the pew. Also, having the congregation sing hymns rather than simply playing melodies, eases these concerns.

Why would one be denied?[23]

1. unBaptized or non-Christian
2. Denies that the body and blood is present, in, with, and under the bread and wine for the forgiveness of sins.
3. Unrepentent sinner
4. Holding to false teachings

The Lord's Supper is not just between an individual and God. Nowhere in scripture is that idea recorded. It is compared to communion, it is emphatically related to unity or fellowship.

For a pastor to be flippant in his administration of the sacrament is to act as a pastor of wrath. One should indeed ward against such practices as against the devil incarnate himself.

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[1] Since I deem doctrine and practice to be one and the same, I will treat it as so.

[2] Giving evidence that clarity and teaching is important in the doctrine of the church

[3] 1 Cor. 10:16-21 (ESV)

[4] Granted there were no denominations to speak of for 1600 years

[5] All are welcome (Most require that you be Christian, but some don't even do that)

[6] Agree to a set of statements in a bulletin, or minimal requirement of agreement of what happens in the Lord's Supper.

[7] Varying degrees...however, doctrinal unity is required

[8] SC IV.

[9] AAC, XIII:20

[10] SA IX

[11] LC V.58

[12] FC, VII.

[13] LC

[14] SC, Preface.11

[15] What Luther Says. 2522.

[16] Walther, C. F. W.. Theses on Communion Fellowship with Those Who Believe Differently. 1990. Reprint, St. Louis, MO: Uncertain, 2009. P. 4-5

[17] Pieper, Francis. Christian Dogmatics. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1952. P. 386

[18] This particular quote should be of great note on account of the fact that Calvin denied the bodily presence in the Lord's Supper, however even he acknowledged in multiple places that there is significance to the fellowship at the Lord's Supper.

[19] Institutes of the Christian religion. IV. Xii.5

[20] Chemnitz, Martin, and Luther Poellot. Ministry, word, and sacraments: an enchiridion ; The Lord's Supper ; The Lord's Prayer. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Pub. House, 2007. P. 171-172

[21] It is of note that many of the church fathers commit to some level of discipline in regards to the Lord's Supper. The Didache spoke this as did Clement of Alexandria.

[22] St. Justin Martyr, First Apology, 66 (AD 150)

[23] A pastor doesn't seek these out. However, he would become aware of it by some means.