

AN EXPLANATION OF CLOSED COMMUNION

By Rev. Paul T. McCain

(taken from Communion Fellowship: A Resource for Understanding, Implementing, and Retaining the Practice of Closed Communion in the Lutheran Parish)

The Lutheran practice of "closed communion" is often a thorny issue in our church. It is bound to cause problems when a member asks the pastor if a friend or loved one of another denomination may take communion and the pastor says no. It seems down-right rude! The reaction may be, "Who do you Lutherans think you are anyway! Are Lutherans better Christians than other people?" Unfortunately, the practice of closed communion is not very well understood. This leads to upset and frustration when the doctrine is put into practice. The best way to overcome these difficulties is with knowledge and understanding of what the practice of closed communion is really all about. It is important to understand first what Lutherans believe about communion, and then we can begin to understand the practice of closed communion.

At one time nearly all of the Lutheran church bodies in America (and indeed, most other Christian churches) practiced closed communion. Among Lutherans today only The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and a few other smaller Lutheran bodies retain this practice. In our church and others, only those persons who have been properly instructed in the meaning, use, and benefit of the Sacrament may receive the Sacrament. Practically speaking, this means that Holy Communion is offered only to those persons who are confirmed members in good standing of LCMS congregations and those church bodies in full pulpit and altar fellowship with us. It should be noted also that communion is not to be given to the unrepentant nor unbelievers. With this in mind it is to be understood that participation in Holy Communion is never a "right" to be "demanded" but rather a privilege which we receive with thanks and great joy. The pastor of the local congregation is responsible for deciding who is to receive communion and who may not receive communion at the congregation's altar, by virtue of his office as a called and ordained servant of the Word. Missouri Synod Lutherans will not wish to receive communion at non-Missouri Synod Lutheran churches for the same reasons that members of other church bodies should not want to receive communion at a Missouri Synod congregation.

Lutherans believe that Holy Communion is a sacrament—a very special gift from our Lord Jesus Christ. On the basis of Holy Scripture, we believe that Jesus Christ gives us his actual body and actual blood to eat and to drink, under the bread and wine, in this Sacrament. (See Mt 26:17ff; Mk 14:12ff; Lk 22:7ff; 1 Cor 11:23ff). We do not believe that the bread and wine are only symbols of Christ's body and blood, or that they merely represent Christ's body and blood. We take the Scriptures at face value and believe that the bread is the body of Christ and that the wine is the blood of Christ because Jesus said, "This is my body," and "This is my blood." We call this belief the doctrine of the Real Presence. We believe that when we receive the body and blood of Christ, under the bread and wine, God forgives our sins. This awareness causes us to be very careful in our celebration of the Sacrament. We know that those who do not discern

the body of Christ in the Sacrament do so at their own risk. In other words, persons who are members of church bodies which do not confess the Real Presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper are better off not receiving it at our altar. In His Word, God says, "Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord" (1 Cor 11:27).

The Sacrament of Holy Communion is not simply a personal, individual act. The celebration of Holy Communion is also a public act of confession. In other words, it testifies to our unity in the "teaching of the Apostles" (cf. Acts 2:42). When you receive the Sacrament at a church's altar, you are giving public testimony that you agree with that church's doctrinal position. This is why we believe, teach, and confess that Holy Communion is the highest expression of church fellowship. We believe that to agree about the Gospel is more than agreeing to some generalities concerning Jesus or the Bible. There is no such thing as a "generic" Christianity. When we commune together we testify to our agreement in the Gospel and all the articles of the Christian Faith. Holy Communion, in this sense, is a mark of confessing the Christian Faith.

When we decline to give Holy Communion to persons not of our church body, we are not doing so because we think they are "bad people" or because they are "not Christians." We practice a "closeness" at our communion rail because we sincerely believe that this is what the Word of God teaches and what God would have us do with his Son's precious body and blood. Closed communion is not meant to be a judgmental practice, in the sense that we are condemning people. It is a practice which preserves and upholds the truth and power of the Sacrament. It is a practice which we Lutherans feel protects those who do not believe the same things as we do. It is a practice which recognizes that a person's church membership does mean something. To belong to a church means to confess what that church believes and confesses. To commune at a church's altar is the highest expression of confessing oneness with what that church teaches. A person must determine for oneself if what one's church teaches is what the Word of God teaches. We respect each individual's decision in this matter, but we cannot in good conscience create the impression that differences between churches are of no significance. Because the differences between churches concern the Gospel of our Savior Jesus Christ, we know that the differences are important and do matter. This is why we choose to practice closed communion, a practice which is found in the historic, orthodox Lutheran Church since the time of the Reformation and a practice which can be traced back to the very early years of the Christian church. We hope that our beliefs will be respected by those who differ with us. We certainly do not intend to offend anyone or do we wish to create ill-will and hurt feelings. Hopefully, this brief explanation will help you or someone else understand that our love for the Sacrament, and our love for the individual, are the motivations for our practice of closed communion.