

Reviewing the Practice of Closed Communion

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Our synod's *Explanation of Luther's Small Catechism* lists four points for a person's proper examination before receiving the Lord's Supper: 1) true repentance of sins; 2) believing in Jesus as one's Savior; 3) believing that the true body and blood of Christ are offered in the Supper for the forgiveness of sins; and 4) sincerely desiring, with the aid of the Holy Spirit, to amend one's sinful life. In light of these four points, the question often is raised: Should the Lord's Supper ever be refused to someone who successfully has self-examined according to these points and yet holds membership in a church body not of our fellowship?

A connection exists between point 4) above and confessing one's faith. A sincere desire to amend one's sinful life implies and includes a firm desire to confess *all* the doctrines of Scripture in their truth and purity. Normally included, then, is serious consideration of where one holds denominational and/or synodical membership. In thankful allegiance to the Lord Jesus who has instituted his Supper for holy use, the communicant wishes to adhere to the words of Christ in how one makes a clear confession of the faith ("...teaching them to obey *everything* I have commanded you..." Matt. 28:20). When communicants eat and drink the true body and blood of Christ at the same altar, doctrinal agreement is being indicated publicly. The common Table gives expression to confessional fellowship, providing outward evidence of unity in the faith.

A sizable number of Lutherans have difficulty seeing how synodical affiliations affect the body of doctrine they confess. The closed Communion practice followed in the ELS and in the WELS reminds all that these "membership connections" ought not be taken lightly. In love, we have a duty to warn our neighbor about every manner of false teaching. We also know how our Lord has forbidden fellowship with errorists (Rom. 16:17; Matt. 7:15, 20; Gal. 1:8-9; etc.).

Careful pastoral advice and direction especially is needed when dealing with those who may privately profess agreement and yet unsuspectingly hold membership in a Lutheran church body that promotes or tolerates error. As a rule, though, we would say one has not self-examined *properly* when there is disregard for the way church membership has a bearing on one's public confession of the Christian faith.

At the 2015 ELS General Pastoral Conference, some questions were raised in connection with a popularly cited brief, "The Aaberg/Lawrenz Statement," known by the names of its now sainted authors. For those unfamiliar with the statement, we are providing the wording in a footnote below.¹ The statement was written in 1976 and

¹ A reply of the WELS Commission on Inter-Church Relations and of the ELS Board of Theology and Church Relations based on their synods' public confession on the doctrine of church fellowship to a question regarding church fellowship raised by pastors from the Conference of Authentic Lutherans.

approved by leaders in the ELS and the WELS. Its intent was not to soften or deny our Communion practice since it solidly reflects the principle that we commune only those communicant members who are in good standing within our doctrinal fellowship (that is, the CELC). The Aaberg/Lawrenz statement does mention that an exception might be made in admitting to the Table one who *formally* is not a member of ELS/WELS but whose *informal* confession of faith must also be considered. This is not to be regarded as a license for the pastor as gatekeeper to treat lightly the practice of closed Communion. Rather, the statement speaks to a case of casuistry where pastoral judgment is exercised in an extraordinary circumstance. Since a private, pastoral judgment is made in a special case as this where also the elders are informed, the “exception to the rule” should not be widely publicized lest needless offense be given.

We should take opportunity to remind ourselves periodically of the importance of adhering to the closed Communion practice. The two chief reasons for our practice are these:

1) *The vertical concern* –

By having a closed Communion practice we assist those who commune at our altars in examining carefully their need for the Savior’s forgiveness of sins, in understanding that it is the true body and blood of the Lord Jesus they are receiving in the Sacrament, and in knowing and believing without a doubt that through the body and blood of Jesus, under the bread and wine, the forgiveness of sins is conveyed personally to the repentant sinner. There also should be a desire to serve the Lord in thankfulness for this tremendous gift of his mercy, striving to conform our daily lives to God’s commandments. To discern the Lord’s body and blood is so vital in preparation for worthy reception of the sacrament that the Apostle Paul mentions a judgment can fall upon an ill-prepared communicant (1 Corinthians 11:28-33). This is the chief reason for having a closed Communion practice. It demonstrates to each communicant under one’s pastoral care the necessary love and concern for a proper and beneficial reception, not a harmful one.

Do we hold that the exercise of church fellowship, especially prayer and altar fellowship, can be decided in every instance solely on the basis of formal church membership, that is, on whether or not the person belongs to a congregation or synod in affiliation with us?

No. Ordinarily this is the basis on which such a question is decided since church fellowship is exercised on the basis of one’s confession to the pure marks of the church, and ordinarily we express our confession by our church membership. There may be cases in the exercise of church fellowship where a person’s informal confession of faith must also be considered. This is especially true regarding the weak. But whether one is guided by a person’s formal or informal confession of faith, in either instance it must in principle be a confession to the full truth of God’s Word. In addition, special care must be exercised so as not to cause offense to others or to interfere with another man’s ministry. Further, we are not to judge harshly concerning the manner in which a brother pastor after much agonizing handles such difficult cases. *Lutheran Sentinel* 59, no. 14 (July 22, 1976): 220–221; Evangelical Lutheran Synod, *Synod Report*, 1976: 65.

2) *The horizontal concern –*

By the practice of closed Communion we also are making a confession of faith with fellow communicants, i.e., that the body of doctrine believed and confessed is in conformity with Scripture. We think here of the comment in 1 Corinthians 11:26 regarding “proclaiming the Lord’s death until he comes.” We think also of the words Jesus spoke in Matthew 28, impressing on his followers of every age to “observe all things as He has commanded.” This too involves a deeply loving reason for being cautious as to whom we commune at our altars. It serves as a protection for the unity of faith inside the congregation of believers (locally and synodically). It also serves as a testimony to the serious nature of confessing the truth on all biblical teachings, a confession of faith ordinarily shown by the membership in a given congregation and/or church body. Here especially we see the need to observe in Communion the fellowship lines expressed through the holding of one’s membership in a particular denomination or synod. Neglecting this procedure in how we conduct our Communion worship services readily results in a laxity of a clear doctrinal confession made by the regular communicant membership at a given church. It also sends an erroneous signal to a visiting communicant not of our fellowship that doctrinal confession must not be so important, after all. Again, love for God’s doctrine and love for the soul of each communicant is at stake.

In light of the above, we encourage our synod’s pastors and congregations to be sure to include a closed Communion statement of some type in the Communion Sunday bulletins. We assume this already is being done but, where an announcement may not be part of a regular routine, we urge a brief note be included. Two examples of such are given here.

Our _____ congregation has a practice of admitting to the Lord’s Supper communicant members of our doctrinal fellowship (ELS and WELS). Visitors who may desire to commune with us are asked to speak with the pastor prior to the worship service.

We at _____ congregation desire to offer the Lord’s Supper to communicants who are properly prepared to attend this holy meal. A beneficial reception of the Sacrament of the Altar includes a heart that confesses sin and the need for the Savior, trusts in the true body and blood of Christ as offered under the bread and wine in the Supper for the remission of sins, and desires to live a Christian life in thanksgiving for the blessings received. For this reason, we have the practice of serving the Lord’s Supper to our own communicant membership and to those who hold membership in congregations of our fellowship (ELS and WELS). Visitors are kindly asked to speak with the pastor before approaching the Lord’s Table.

May God help all of us as fellow members of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod to remain unified in both doctrine and practice. For this, we implore God the Holy Spirit!