

Why Do You Practice Closed Communion at Immanuel Lutheran Church?

Rev. Dr. Keith W. Schweitzer

Dear Friend in Christ,

This is a very honest and legitimate question deserving of a thoughtful and truthful answer. I hope to share in this letter the biblical and theological reasons that undergird our practice of closed communion here at Immanuel Lutheran Church in Greenfield, Iowa. In doing so, I seek to “speak the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15) as we discuss a most important aspect of the Christian faith. Anytime we consider the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, we set our eyes on a precious and wonderful gift the Lord Jesus Christ has given to His church. It is a gift that carries with it amazing promises and blessings from God revealed to us in the Holy Scriptures. It is likewise a majestic treasure of the church to which the Scriptures ascribe strong words of warning. We will consider these matters in this letter.

Let me state here before we begin that I sincerely thank you for taking the time to read this letter. I truly pray it may be a blessing to you and helpful in clearly explaining the practice of closed communion during the divine worship services of our congregation.

Closed Communion as Opposed to Open Communion

Addressing the practice of closed communion in our congregation certainly leads to the reasonable inference that it may be compared to an opposing practice of open communion. Thus, we should define these terms and how they apply in the context of the divine service of our congregation.

Practicing open communion is generally understood to mean the members of a local congregation invite and encourage all of the participants in their public worship services to partake of the Sacrament of the Altar if the Sacrament is offered in that particular service. This invitation is inclusive of all individuals participating in the worship service regardless of their understanding of what the Sacrament is or their own personal beliefs in what the Sacrament does. Guests and visitors in the worship service of all theological and religious persuasions are also invited to partake of the Sacrament. The practice of open communion is understandably viewed as being very loving and generous by virtue of the fact that nobody is excluded in the public and communal aspects that are innately associated with the celebration of the Lord’s Supper in the local congregation. Indeed, the

perception is created that in this sacred act, all of the participants “are in full communion with God and with each other.” A person’s own understanding or misunderstanding of what is actually occurring in this very holy activity is of no consequence. May I respectfully state that despite this appearance that open communion may truly seem loving because of its inclusive characteristics, it is in reality quite the opposite. It is a practice that leads to great harm. The Bible speaks of this danger and we shall consider this matter further.

Closed communion, as the name suggests, is a restrictive and, I believe, a much more responsible and caring approach to celebrating the Sacrament within the context of the local congregation. Closed communion is our practice here at Immanuel Lutheran Church. Despite the appearance that closed communion is a “screening” process in which the elders and pastor set themselves as “arbiters” who decide who can and who cannot partake of the Lord’s Supper; the truth is that in practicing closed communion we earnestly desire for all of the participating communicants to have a thorough knowledge and accurate understanding of what we as Lutherans believe about the Sacrament of the Altar as well as all other basic doctrines of the Christian faith. We firmly believe in the supreme importance of the individual communicant truly being able to examine himself properly before partaking of this holy supper. A flawed understanding of the Sacrament can only lead to a flawed self-examination before the Sacrament. The Scriptures clearly warn of the danger in not properly discerning the body and blood of the Lord Jesus Christ in the Sacrament.

ESV 1 Corinthians 11:27 Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning 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.²⁹ For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.

These are very strong words from St. Paul. And they certainly carry with them the premise that as we consider the Sacrament of the Altar, we indeed consider a most important aspect of the Christian faith. The Sacrament is a holy gift God has given to His church that we regard with the highest diligence. This is very serious business.

Similarly, the pastor of the local congregation has a critical role to play as he has been called to officiate in the celebrating of the Sacrament. The

pastor is not simply a “facilitator” to see that the process of administering the Sacramental elements occurs in an orderly and reverential manner. He is, in fact, responsible for every single person who comes forward to the altar to receive the bread and wine. The Scriptures speak to this aspect of the pastoral office.

^{ESV} **Hebrews 13:17** Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

^{ESV} **James 3:1** Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

Regarding his office as pastor, Martin Luther wrote:

“I have the commission and charge, as a preacher and a doctor, to see to it that no one is misled, so that I may give an account of it at the Last Judgment.”

For the pastor to properly carry out his responsibilities in his congregation means he has a pastoral relationship with the members. It means he genuinely loves his people. He preaches to and teaches them true doctrine. And he knows what the members of his congregation believe regarding the Lord’s Supper as well as all other doctrines of the faith. For the pastor to be faced at the altar by a person he does not know who intends to receive the Lord’s Supper is to cause him to seriously compromise his pastoral responsibilities.

In concluding this section of my letter, I need to state that the practice of closed communion is not a recent innovation in the Lutheran Church. It is a practice that is clearly taught in the Bible. Again, St. Paul’s language is strong:

^{ESV} **Romans 16:17** I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them.

In January of 1533, the Lutheran congregation in Frankfurt, Germany received a letter from Luther in which he warned them against communing with those of another faith. He had in mind particularly the Zwinglian (Ulrich

Zwingli, Swiss Reformer, 1484-1531) deniers of the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Sacrament. You may think Luther's language harsh by today's standards. However, please consider the gist of his words and the important point they convey.

“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 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. Whoever, therefore, has such preachers or suspects them to be such, let him be warned against them as against the devil incarnate himself.”

Certainly, Luther leaves no doubt that in matters pertaining to the Lord's Supper, we do well to regard the Sacrament with the utmost importance.

What I Believe, Teach, and Confess Regarding the Lord's Supper

As we have briefly considered several differences between the practices of open and closed communion, I hope it will be beneficial for you to offer an overview of what I believe regarding the Lord's Supper. Let me preface this section by stating that although I am a Lutheran pastor, I am not a “native” Lutheran. By this I mean I did not have the privilege of growing up in a Lutheran family as have many of you. In fact, I am the only Lutheran in my family. I am literally a “convert” to the Lutheran faith and I completely embrace the doctrines and teachings of the Lutheran Church. What does this mean? It means I wholeheartedly believe the Lutheran Church teaches the truth of the Christian faith in every respect. That the Lutheran Church teaches what the Bible teaches. And, yes, by necessity this also means I believe only the Lutheran Church teaches the whole truth of salvation in Jesus Christ that is taught in the Holy Scriptures. I would not be honest to myself nor to you if I stated otherwise. I believe I am saved completely because of what the Lord Jesus Christ has done for me apart from anything I may do for myself. By Christ's perfect death on His cross of crucifixion and His triumphant

resurrection from His tomb three days later, I have received the forgiveness of all of my sins. I have been given the gift of saving faith. And I now have heaven as my eternal home. I embrace the bedrock doctrine of the Lutheran Church which is the doctrine of justification based upon Romans 1:16-17:

ESV Romans 1:16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”

I believe this foundational truth is beautifully expressed in the great “solas” of the Lutheran Church. That I am saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in the Lord Jesus Christ alone, as He is revealed in the Scriptures alone.

Specifically, as this pertains to the Sacrament of the Altar, it means that although many different teachings abound regarding the Lord’s Supper, I believe the teaching of the Lutheran Church is the correct one. It is from this basis that I proceed with a brief overview of my beliefs regarding the Lord’s Supper. In doing so, I again return to the source of my beliefs which is the Bible. I believe the Scriptures are the inspired, inerrant, and infallible Word of God. That in them God has revealed Himself to us and has caused His divine drama of salvation to unfold and reach its climax in the person, life, and saving work of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Bible records Jesus instituting the Lord’s Supper on the Thursday night before His death the following Good Friday morning.

ESV Matthew 26:26 Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, “Take, eat; this is my body.”²⁷ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink of it, all of you,²⁸ for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.²⁹ I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.”

From this passage of Scripture several important facts can be gleaned regarding the Lord’s Supper.

- The Lord Jesus Christ instituted this Sacrament.
- He used bread and wine (specifically unleavened bread and fermented wine) and directed His disciples to eat and drink these elements.

- He stated the bread and wine were His own body and blood.
- He likewise stated that eating and drinking this bread and wine brings the forgiveness of sins.

This is truly an amazing thing the Lord did that night. Knowing full well He would die the next morning, Jesus nevertheless left His disciples and us with this precious gift that we continue to celebrate in our worship services today over 2,000 years later. We use the same elements. We receive the same body and blood of Christ in communion with those elements. And we eat and drink these four elements (bread and wine, body and blood) to receive the forgiveness of our sins.

It really is that simple. And yet it is so amazing. God's lovingkindness and gracious goodness that He pours out every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper is truly a miracle. When we partake of the Lord's Supper we are witnesses as well as participants in this miracle. We receive the forgiveness of our sins. Our saving faith is strengthened. Fellowship with God and with our brothers and sisters is manifested in our shared faith in Christ and our common understanding of this holy supper. Our eternal destiny in heaven with our Savior Jesus Christ is once again proclaimed.

This is what I believe regarding the Lord's Supper. This is what I teach about the Lord's Supper. Because I believe this teaching is so important we uphold the practice of closed communion here at Immanuel Lutheran Church.

Is this your understanding of the Lord's Supper? Is this what you believe about the Sacrament? Are you perhaps uncertain in your knowledge of the Lord's Supper? You need to be honest with yourself. The Scriptures do not allow for varying interpretations of the meaning and purpose of the Sacrament. They teach one very clear and succinct doctrine of the Lord's Supper. St. Paul writes:

ESV 1 Corinthians 14:33 For God is not a God of confusion but of peace.

If you would like to consider this very important and wonderful doctrine further or to discuss it with me, I certainly stand ready to visit with you anytime and at anyplace. As the folks here at Immanuel Lutheran Church can say, I *love* to talk about the Lord's Supper. Please call or write 24/7. My cell number is 641-745-5143 and my e-mail address is keithlcms@gmail.com.

A Special Word to Our Friends in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)

Being a pastor in the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, I am sometimes asked why I practice closed communion even with fellow Lutherans in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (the ELCA)? Are we not all Lutherans? Do we not all believe the very same things regarding the Lord's Supper as I have described in this letter? Sadly, we do not. In truth, the teachings regarding the Lord's Supper in our two major Lutheran church bodies are quite different.

ELCA Pastor Louis W. Accola published a book in 2007 entitled *Given for You – Reflections on the Meaning of the Lord's Supper*. In his book, Pastor Accola correctly states his rejection of the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church as they pertain to the Lord's Supper. Pastor Accola writes:

“First, we must realize that what occurs in the Lord's Supper is not, in any sense, a redoing of Jesus' sacrifice. Nor it is a re-presenting of Jesus to God. Such understandings make the sacrament into a human work performed to merit God's favor and acceptance, something already accomplished once and for all in Jesus' death and resurrection. To suppose that to *do this in remembrance of me* means that the benefits of the sacrament are dependent somehow upon our offering of the bread and wine—Jesus' body and blood—disregards the fact that God has the primary role in the meal, as God does in our salvation. To do this is to put the biblical order of things in reverse. It is to believe that we act in order to experience redemption” (p. 41).

Let me state that I unequivocally agree with Pastor Accola's assertions made in this statement. The Roman Catholic doctrines he repeats in this statement are in serious error. However, Pastor Accola states later in his book that the doctrinal errors of the Roman Catholic Church as well as other church bodies are mere “opinions” and ought not to be regarded as reason for undue concern.

“To be sure, there are differences of opinion concerning the meaning of the Lord's Supper that are nearly as old as the meal itself. These differences of opinion can create strife if we let them. Some traditions put the emphasis in the Supper on repentance, others on Jesus' sacrifice. Still others stress its importance as a time of fellowship

and joy. These differences of interpretation and emphasis make for spirited and earnest conversation about the Lord's Supper. But too often we allow these differences to divide the Christian community and to exclude from the meal those whom we deem "unworthy" on the basis of our own interpretation, legalism, or prejudice. Such practice, we have seen, is contrary to Jesus' action in the Upper Room where all disciples, regardless of past failures or future intents, were included in the meal."

Whether a Lutheran Holy Communion, a Methodist Memorial Feast, a Catholic Mass, an Episcopalian Eucharist, or a Community Church Friendship Meal, we come together for this meal because Jesus invites us. This is, after all, the *Lord's Supper*" (p. 77-78).

Pastor Accola is seriously mistaken when he suggests that the various "opinions" of these different church bodies are of no consequence or that they are seemingly all variations on a common theme. Similarly, the differences ought not to be grounds for exercising Christian love and concern for a person who either holds an incorrect view regarding the Lord's Supper or who does not understand what is occurring in the Sacrament.

An important fact to remember is that the Bible has only one meaning and purpose of the Lord's Supper—not many. We may be able to say that some of the "opinions" represented by this collection of church bodies may be in error. We may also be able to say that *all* of the opinions expressed are in error. However, we cannot say that all of the opinions are simultaneously correct. This leads to the very strife and confusion Pastor Accola seeks to avoid.

Another important item of note; Pastor Accola states that all of the disciples regardless of their "past failures or future intents" were present in the Upper Room when Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper. This is biblically and historically incorrect. In the Gospel of St. John, we read this narrative of the unfolding of events on the night Jesus instituted the Sacrament:

^{ESV} **John 13:21** After saying these things, Jesus was troubled in his spirit, and testified, "Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me."²² The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he spoke.²³ One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was reclining at table close to Jesus,²⁴ so Simon Peter motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking.²⁵ So that disciple, leaning back against Jesus, said to him, "Lord, who is it?"²⁶ Jesus answered, "It is he to whom I will give this morsel of bread when I have dipped it." So when he had dipped the morsel, he gave it to

Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot.²⁷ Then after he had taken the morsel, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "What you are going to do, do quickly."²⁸ Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him.²⁹ Some thought that, because Judas had the moneybag, Jesus was telling him, "Buy what we need for the feast," or that he should give something to the poor.³⁰ So, after receiving the morsel of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

The sequence of events occurring that night as recorded by St. John indicates that Jesus ordered His disciple and betrayer, Judas, to depart from the room prior to His institution of the Lord's Supper.

One final point to consider from Pastor Accola's book. St. Paul's strong admonition in 1 Corinthians 11:27 as has been previously discussed in this letter is not addressed or even mentioned by Pastor Accola. This omission, whether intentional or unintentional, leaves the reader with many unanswered questions. Are St. Paul's words not to be regarded seriously? Do they have no bearing on our understanding and practice of the Lord's Supper? Does *anybody* receive the body and blood of Christ unto judgment? Would St. Paul have written these strong words if he did not intend for us to regard them with similar strength?

I very much understand that the practice of closed communion runs contrary to our popular American culture in which we seek to be tolerant of all views, opinions, and persuasions. However, the simple truth is that Jesus meant only one thing when He instituted the Lord's Supper. That the elements of bread and wine in communion with His very body and blood are eaten and drunk for the forgiveness of sins. I stand on this single truth regarding the blessed Sacrament. I believe that with the forgiveness of sins comes the eternal blessings of faith, salvation, and heaven with the Lord Jesus Christ that He earned with His passion and resurrection. For this reason, I will continue to practice closed communion.

Thank you again for your kind attention to these very important matters. I pray God's blessings upon you always in our Lord Jesus Christ.