



What About . . .

## *Fellowship in the Lord's Supper*

**F**ellowship in the Lord's Supper is the basis for the practice of "close" or "closed communion." (The phrases "close communion" and "closed communion" refer to one and the same practice). This pamphlet will help you appreciate, understand and explain to others the practice of close communion.

### **What does God teach in His Word?**

"Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, 'Take and eat; this is my body.' Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.'" (cf. Matt. 26:26–28; Mark 14:22–25; Luke 22:14–20; 1 Cor. 11:17–29).

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42).

"Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. Therefore, 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. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself" (1 Cor. 11:26–29).

### **What does the Lutheran church believe about the Lord's Supper?**

The Lutheran church believes, teaches and confesses that the Lord's Supper is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, under the bread and wine, given to us Christians to eat and to drink. We hold that the bread and the wine in the Supper are the true body and blood of Christ and that these are given and received into the mouths of all who commune. Those who believe the promise: "Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins," receive forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. This promise, along with the bodily eating and drinking, is the main thing in the Sacrament.

The Lutheran church rejects and condemns incorrect understandings of the Lord's Supper, such as the view that the sacrifice of the Mass delivers man from his sins, or that the substance of the consecrated bread and wine is actually

changed into the body and blood of Christ. We also reject and condemn the view that in the Lord's Supper the true body and blood of Christ is not received by the mouth of the communicants, under the bread and wine, but is received only spiritually in the heart by faith, or that the bread and wine are only symbols of the far-distant body and blood of our Lord.

### **How is the Lord's Supper an expression of church fellowship?**

While the Lord's Supper is always a personal matter, it is never a private matter. That is an important truth that is often overlooked. Those who commune at the same altar are thereby declaring publically that they are united in the doctrine of the Apostles (Acts 2:42). Therefore, fellowship in the Supper is church fellowship. This is what is taught by Holy Scripture in 1 Cor. 10 and 11. Here is how one of our church's teachers explained this truth.

"As there is but one bread, one loaf, from which we eat, so we who are eating of this loaf are one body. The eating of one and the same loaf of bread unifies us to one body. Our participation in the Lord's Supper is a public profession on our part that we are not only in fellowship with Christ, but that we also are in fellowship with those with whom we commune at the Lord's Table. We all eat the same bread, the body of Christ. Through that act we indicate that we belong together. All of us Christians who in the Lord's Supper eat the body of Christ and drink His blood present ourselves as one spiritual family. What we eat and drink together, Christ's body and blood, ties us together more closely than the bonds of blood. We declare ourselves to be brothers and sisters in Christ. Upon this Bible passage do we base the saying, 'Altar Fellowship is Church Fellowship.'

"This passage in Corinthians strikes a crushing blow at unionism. To admit those who believe differently to our Communion, and so to our church fellowship, is a contradiction in itself. For those who approach the same altar together profess to be one—one in all points of Christian doctrine and practice—while in reality they disagree. It would be shameful hypocrisy on our part if we would have those who actually profess a different faith than we do join us at the Lord's Altar" (Stoekhardt, *1 Corinthians*, p. 60–61).

## What About Fellowship in the Lord's Supper?

Another teacher of our church had this to say about why the Lord's Supper is an expression of church fellowship:

"The Holy Supper is one of the marks, one of the banners of the church, one of the seals of the church's doctrine and faith (Rom. 4:11; see 1 Cor. 10:21; Ex. 12:48). In whichever church one receives the Holy Supper, one is confessing that church and its doctrine. There cannot be a more inward, brotherly fellowship than that into which one enters with those in whose fellowship he receives the holy Supper. . . . Even one who confesses the Real Presence cannot ordinarily, except in the case of death, be admitted if he is and wants to remain, not a member of our orthodox church, but rather a Roman Catholic, Reformed, so-called Evangelical or Unionist, Methodist, Baptist, in short, a member of an erring fellowship. For the Sacrament, as it is a seal of faith, is also the banner of the fellowship in which it is administered" (Walther, *Pastoral Theology*, p. 110–111, 149).

### What is the Lutheran church's motive for practicing close communion?

Our Synod's Commission on Theology and Church Relations offers the following helpful explanation of why we practice close communion:

"Close communion seeks to prevent a profession of confessional unity in faith where there is, in fact, disunity and disagreement. It would be neither faithful to the Scriptural requirements for admission to Holy Communion (1 Cor. 11:27ff; cf. 10:16–17) nor helpful to fallen humanity if the Christian Church welcomes to its altars those who deny or question clear Scriptural teachings.

"The reasons for the practice of close Communion are often misunderstood by Christians who have been accustomed to an 'open Communion' policy. In a tract titled, *Why Close Communion?* the rationale for the practice of close communion is explained in this way:

'So it is not that a Lutheran congregation wants to bar fellow-saints from the blessings of the Eucharist when they practice Close Communion. It is not that they want to be separatistic, or set themselves up as judges of other men. The practice of Close Communion is prompted by love and is born of the heartfelt conviction, on the basis of Scripture alone, that we must follow Christ's command. This means refusing the Lord's Supper to those whose belief is not known to us. It is not showing love to allow a person to do something harmful, even though he may think it is for his own good. It also means if they are members of a Christian body which departs from the full truth of the Scripture in some of its doctrines, that we

must not minimize the evil of this false teaching by opening our fellowship to any and all Christians who err in the faith' [Deffner, *Why Close Communion?*, p. 14].

"In keeping with the principle that the celebration and reception of the Lord's Supper is a confession of the unity of faith, while at the same time recognizing that there will be instances when sensitive pastoral care needs to be exercised, the Synod has established an official practice requiring, 'that pastors and congregations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, except in situations of emergency and in special cases of pastoral care, commune individuals of only those synods that are now in fellowship with us. By following this practice whereby only those individuals who are members of the Synod or of a church body with which the Synod is in altar and pulpit fellowship are ordinarily communed, pastors and congregations preserve the integrity of their witness to the Gospel of Christ as it is revealed in the Scriptures and confessed in the Lutheran confessional writings.'"

"The Office of the Keys is less than faithfully exercised when admission to the Sacrament is granted to all who come to the altar regardless of their faith and congregational and/or denominational affiliation. The practice of open Communion renders it difficult, if not impossible, for church discipline to be exercised in a way that honors the ministrations being carried out by those to whom the responsibility of spiritual care for a member of God's flock has been entrusted" (Heb. 13:17; cf. John 20:22–23; Acts 20:27–28; 1 Cor. 4:1–2. *Theology and Practice of the Lord's Supper*, pp. 21–23).

### Conclusion

On the basis of God's Holy Word, our Lutheran church continues to practice the ancient, Biblical and confessional practice of close communion as an opportunity to give joyful witness to our unity in the true faith. We practice close communion with the belief that this is what the Lord would have us do as we faithfully administer His body and blood in His holy Sacrament.

Close communion is not a practice unique to The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. It is also practiced by the majority of Christians in the world who are members of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox communions.

Hopefully, this brief explanation will help you, or someone else, understand that our love for our Lord and His Sacrament, and our love for the individual, is the reason why we practice close communion.

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