

What We Believe about the Lord's Supper

Fellowship in the Church

All authentic Lutheran churches cling to the Biblical practice of "fellowship," often called "closed communion" today. It can at first be a confusing thing to those who come from Christian traditions which do not take the bodily presence of Christ in his Supper as seriously as Lutherans do. For Lutherans, faithfulness to these Words of our Lord are a most essential part of our walking together.

How the Lord Gives the Gift

“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).

So...

Lutherans believe, teach and confess 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.

But this also means that all false understandings of the Lord's Supper come between this gracious gift and your faith. Both putting our trust in the human work of the sacrifice of the Mass (such as Roman Catholicism teaches) **and** putting our trust in a mere "spiritual" symbol of the far-distant body of the Lord (as most evangelicals believe), are considered by us equally dangerous false teachings. These teachings come between you and the great and precious promises given to you by our Lord. For this reason, we believe that all faithful Christians, once brought to this realization, can neither believe these things, nor allow them to be taught in their midst.

Communion is About Community

The Lord's Supper is always a **personal** matter, but it is never a **private** matter. In 1 Corinthians, St. Paul teaches us that Christians who commune together declare publicly that they are united in the body of Christ and the doctrine which Christ taught. One Lutheran teacher put it this way:

"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. ...What we eat and drink together, Christ's body and blood, ties us together more closely than the bonds of blood.' (Stoeckhardt, *1 Corinthians*, p.60–61).

To admit to this physical fellowship with Christ those who do not believe that any such fellowship actually exists would be a great hypocrisy on our part. To approach the most sacred, Christian meal of unity, while believing vastly different things about it, and at the same time pretending that such differences do not exist, can only do harm to our commitment to believing anything in unity at all.

Judgmental or Faithful?

In our hyper-accusatory culture, there is a fine line between honesty and offensive behavior. Often times, simple disagreement is enough to raise up cries of, "I'm offended!" We recognize this, and wish it were not so. We believe it is possible for Christian brothers and sisters to disagree, even to the point of division, without resorting to accusations, attacks and malignity. As little as we would expect a baptist congregation to baptize our babies should we visit one Sunday, so do we equally desire the charity of other Christians to understand our convictions on the matter of the Lord's Supper.

Closed communion is the effort of faith to prevent the profession of "peace, peace," even where there is no peace (cf. Jeremiah 6:14.) It is neither faithful to the Bible, nor helpful to any of us who are fallen sinners, to welcome into the Church the "agreement to disagree" on the clear Words of our Lord in his very last will and Testament.

Another well-regarded teacher of the Church put it this way: "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).