

Close Communion, Its Basis and Practice

by Wilmer G. Hoffmann

[Presented to the South-Central Pastor-Delegate Conference of the South Atlantic District meeting in Decatur, Georgia, on October 4, 1983]

It is no secret that many churches including Roman Catholic, Reformed, and even Lutheran, practice some form of “open communion.” That is, they allow people of other denominations to partake of the Lord’s Supper in their church. Our Lutheran church still practices “close” or “closed communion,”¹ admitting only those who share the same faith as we do. Since our church and its pastors are repeatedly faced with the problem concerning whom we may admit to the Sacrament from within our own church and from without we shall now consider *Close Communion, its Basis and Practice*.

I. Historical Basis

It makes little difference whether under the term “close communion” you exclude only “those who are of a different faith” (*Luther’s Catechism*, Gausewitz, 1956, p. 227) or include only “repentant sinners, those who are instructed so that they know the meaning of Christ’s death, those who are able to examine themselves, and those who are one with us in all we believe and teach” (*Luther’s Catechism*, Kuske, 1982, pp. 264-266). For the purpose of this paper I prefer the wider concept.

In a textbook for Pastoral theology, *The Shepherd Under Christ* (Schuetze and Habeck, 1974), the authors say:

While the gospel is to be preached “to all nations,” the Lord’s Supper is intended only for certain Christians. It was given to nourish and strengthen those who already know Christ as their Savior. The Lord has placed restrictions on its use. These the church is to observe lest someone receive the sacrament unworthily and bring judgment on himself. Scripture leads to a practice that is called “close communion.”

The pastor, called as a steward of God’s mysteries (1 Cor 4:1) administers the Lord’s Supper for the congregation. The Lord bids him watch for the souls of the flock (He 13:17) and warn them against sin (Eze 3:17-21), responsibilities that he must remember in his stewardship of this sacrament. Thus the pastor must know who according to Scripture may be admitted. He will follow practices that encourage worthy and frequent reception of the sacrament. He lets the Word of God alone be normative for the manner of its celebration. (p. 79)

A. Who May Be Admitted

The Baptized...Only those who have become identified with the Lord through baptism may receive Holy Communion. That this was the practice in the apostolic church is evident, e.g., from Acts 2:41f and from 1 Corinthians 11. (pp. 79-80)

Those Who Examine Themselves: However, even among the baptized only those who can and do “examine” themselves (1 Cor 11:27-28) are to eat and drink in the sacrament. This means that they recognize and condemn sin in themselves and that they, as Paul puts it, “discern the Lord’s body.” They know and believe that Jesus’ death on the cross is the atonement for sin and that in the sacrament they receive His body and blood as pledge and assurance of God’s grace toward

¹ Both terms, “close” and “closed” communion, are applied to this practice. The former stresses that those who are one in faith enter into this intimate fellowship in communion. The other stresses that the communion is “closed” against those outside the fellowship.

them. “Discerning the Lord’s body” thus involves more than belief in the bare doctrine of the real presence. (p. 80)

Eating and Drinking Unworthily: Not all who are baptized and have the necessary maturity and understanding do in fact examine themselves in the sense of 1 Corinthians 11:28. There is an unworthy eating and drinking, “not discerning the Lord’s body.” They are “guilty of the body and blood of the Lord.” Such a person “eats and drinks judgment to himself” (1 Cor 11:29—NASB) This is impenitence. The impenitent eats and drinks unworthily. (p. 81)

Communion as an Expression of Fellowship: Although in communion the Lord gives the individual His body and blood for the personal assurance of forgiveness, receiving this blessing at the same altar with others has further implications. St. Paul writes: “We being many are one bread, and one body; for we are all partakers of that one bread” (1 Cor 10:17). Those who partake of the sacrament together thereby express that they are one body in Christ. Fellowship in the sacrament is an expression of confessional fellowship, evidence of unity of faith.

The pastor must therefore not only ask who may receive communion at all, but also who may receive communion in fellowship with his congregation. Normally the pastor communes the members of his congregation. They have called him to serve them in this way (Ac 20:28; 1 Pe 5:2). Anyone else must establish his confessional unity with the congregation before being received as a guest communicant.

Membership in a sister congregation generally suffices for this. The pastor must, however, be sure that his receiving the guest communicant does not violate another pastor’s call or interfere with his ministry. Members who will be absent from their home congregation for longer periods of time, like students or servicemen, may be given communion cards that identify them and commend them to sister churches as communion guests.

Whoever holds membership in a heretical church must first clarify his confessional position before being received at the Lord’s table. It must be clear that he cannot promiscuously receive communion in two churches with diverging confessions. (pp. 82-83)

Practices that Encourage Worthy and Frequent Communion... Lutheran churches that practice close communion have followed some form of communion announcement. While close communion has a biblical basis (Mt 7:6; 1 Cor 5:11,13; 2 Th 3:6; Ro 16:17), the custom of announcing one’s intention of receiving communion to the pastor arose within the church, has no divine command, and thus is an adiaphoron...By requiring announcement prior to the communion service the pastor can to some extent control admission to the sacrament he distributes. (pp. 84-85)

In *Pastoral Theology* (Fritz, 1945, CPH) the author writes:

The Sacrament should not be administered to all persons...but only to such as can examine themselves, are penitent, and orthodox (*Abendmahlsgemeinschaft ist Kirchengemeinschaft*), 1 Cor 11:28,29. Says Chrysostom: “I would rather let my own body be destroyed than permit that the body of the Lord be given to an unworthy person; I would rather let my own blood be shed than permit that the most holy blood of the Lord be given to an unworthy person” (Hom.83 in Matthew). In the Twenty-fifth Article of the Augsburg Confession our Church says: “It is not usual to give the body of the Lord except to them that have been previously examined and absolved.

The practice of some sectarian ministers of inviting all those present, even such as are members of other denominations and such as are altogether unknown to them, to partake of the Sacrament is contrary to the Scriptures. (pp. 109-110)

A Christian may listen to the sermon of a preacher of another denomination (perhaps for the purpose of finding out his doctrinal position or when out of respect to a relative or a friend or a distinguished citizen he attends a funeral) and thereby not become guilty of entering into fellowship with that particular church and of confessing its faith. But when a person communes at the altar of any church, he thereby, by a public act, confesses the faith of that church and at once enters into fellowship with whom he communes. If a Christian in an exceptional case attends the services of any church, no one will from such act conclude that he is a member of that church or that he agrees with its doctrines—it is even likely that he will at once be spotted as a stranger—but if he communes at the altar of any church and thus by such a public outstanding act, presupposing a deliberate determination on his part, lines himself up with the worshippers of that particular church at their own altar, he thereby at once gives to all present sufficient reason to believe that he is not protesting any of the wrong doctrines of that church, but is rather confessing them and has entered into fellowship with the members of that church. All this is apparent from the facts in the case. How could therefore a Lutheran justify his action if he would commune at the altar of such as deny the Real Presence? He himself would thereby be denying together with others. And how could we justify our action if we would permit those who deny the Real Presence or who otherwise do not agree with our doctrines of who are unbelievers to commune at our altar, where we confess the Real Presence and our Christian faith in accordance with the Scrip Lures? By so doing we would become partakers of other men's sins. There is no closer fellowship than that of the Communion table. Such texts as the following apply: 1 Tim. 5:22; Ezek. 3:17,18; 2 Tim. 2:15,25,26; Heb. 13:17; Is. 56:10; 1 Cor. 4:1; Matt.7:6; 1 Cor. 5:11,13; 2 Thess. 3:6,14; 2 John 10,11; Rom.16:17; 1 Tim. 6:3-5; 2 Tim. 3:1-5; Titus 3:10,11; 2 Cor. 6:14-13. Says Luther: "Not only do those dishonor the Sacrament who receive it unworthily, but also those who give it to such as are unworthy." "Lutheran pulpits for Lutheran ministers only; Lutheran altars for Lutheran communicants only" (Galesburg Rule, 1875). (pp. 110-111)

In *The Concordia Cyclopaedia* (Fuerbringer, Engelder, and Kretzmann, eds., 1927, CPH), in "The Lord's Supper," we read:

There are those who eat this bread and drink this cup of the Lord unworthily, who eat and drink, not life and salvation, but damnation, to themselves, 1 Cor 11,29. And such should be warned not to partake of the Sacrament, which was instituted as an assurance of divine grace in Christ for disciples of Christ, and for them only. It is clearly incumbent on those who administer the Sacrament to guard against its abuse by manifestly unworthy communicants and to refuse access to the Lord's Table to those who cannot or will not examine themselves or by word or deed show that they are no disciples of Christ.

But there is still another aspect under which unity of faith must be considered a condition of admission to the same altar in the celebration of the Eucharist. The celebration or use of this Sacrament is, in a certain sense, a sacrificial act, not a propitiatory sacrifice, as offering up the body and blood of Christ, but a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving and a profession of faith. This was one of the purposes for which "the Lord's Supper was instituted...that we might publicly confess our faith and proclaim the benefits of Christ, as Paul says, 1 Cor 11,26: 'As often as ye eat this bread and drink this cup, ye do show the Lord's death'" (*Apol. Aug. Conf.*, III, 6, 89. *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 179) "For," says the same *Apology*, "just as among the

sacrifices of praise, i.e., among the praises of God, we include the preaching of the Word, so the reception itself of the Lord's Supper can be praise, or thanksgiving." (XII, 24, 33. *L.c.*, p. 395). By being all partakers of that one bread, the communicants exhibit themselves as one body, and it is certainly improper that those who dissent and are divided on the very nature and sacramental character of that one bread should fellowship and exhibit unity by communing together where there is actually dissent and division concerning the very act in which they unite and which is to constitute a bond of unity (close Communion) (pp. 416-417).

Additional quotations from the Lutheran Confessions that are pertinent to this subject are here given:

Of the Church... But the Church is not only the fellowship of outward objects and rites, as other governments, but it is originally a fellowship of faith and of the Holy Ghost in hearts. [The Christian Church consists not alone in fellowship of outward signs, but it consists especially in inward communion of eternal blessings in the heart, as of the Holy Ghost, of faith, of the fear and love of God]; which fellowship nevertheless has outward marks so that it can be recognized, namely, the pure doctrine of the Gospel, and the administration of the Sacraments in accordance with the Gospel of Christ. [Namely, where God's Word is pure, and the Sacraments are administered in conformity with the same, there certainly is the Church, and there are Christians.] And this Church alone is called the body of Christ, which Christ renews [Christ is its Head, and] sanctifies and governs by His Spirit, as Paul testifies, Eph. 1,22 sq., when he says: "And gave Him to be the Head over all things to the Church, which is His body, the fulness of Him that filleth all in all" (*Apol. A.C., Tri.* p. 227).

Of the Use of the Sacrament, and of Sacrifice: Some clever men imagine that the Lord's Supper was instituted for two reasons. First, that it might be a mark and testimony of profession, just as a particular shape of hood is the sign of a particular profession. Then they think that such a mark was especially pleasing to Christ, namely, a feast to signify mutual union and friendship among Christians, because banquets are signs of covenant and friendship. But this is a secular view; neither does it show the chief use of things delivered by God; it speaks only of the exercise of love, which men, however profane and worldly understand; it does not speak of faith, the nature of which few understand.

The Sacraments are signs of God's will toward us, and not merely signs of men among each other; and they are right in defining that Sacraments in the New Testament are signs of grace. And because in a sacrament there are two things, a sign and the Word, the Word, in the New Testament, is the promise of grace added. The promise of the New Testament is the promise of the remission of sins, as the text, Luke 22,19, says: "This is My body which is given for you. This cup is the New Testament in My blood, which is shed for many for the remission of sins." Therefore the Word offers the remission of sins. And a ceremony is, as it were, a picture or seal, as Paul, Rom. 4,11, calls it, of the Word, making known the promise. Therefore, just as the promise is useless unless it is received by faith, so a ceremony is useless unless such faith is added as is truly confident that the remission of sins is here offered. And this faith encourages contrite minds. And just as the Word has been given in order to excite faith, so the Sacrament has been instituted in order that the outward appearance meeting the eyes might move the heart to believe (and strengthen faith). For through these, namely, through Word and Sacrament, the Holy Ghost works...

The sacrifice (thank-offering or thanksgiving) also is added. For there are several ends for one object. After conscience encouraged by faith has perceived from what terrors it is freed, then indeed it fervently gives thanks for the benefit and passion of Christ, and uses the ceremony itself to the praise of God, in order by this obedience to show its gratitude; and testifies that it

holds in high esteem the gifts of God. Thus the ceremony becomes a sacrifice of praise (*Apol. A.C., Tri.* pp. 407-411).

The Large Catechism. The Sacrament of the Altar... We must, therefore, make a distinction here among men. For those who are wanton and dissolute must be told to stay away; for they are not prepared to receive forgiveness of sin, since they do not desire it and do not wish to be godly. But the others, who are not such callous and wicked people, and desire to be godly, must not absent themselves, even though otherwise they be feeble and full of infirmities, as St. Hilary also has said: "If any one have not committed sin for which he can rightly be put out of the congregation and esteemed as no Christian, he ought not stay away from the Sacrament, lest he may deprive himself of life. For no one will make such progress that he will not retain many daily infirmities in flesh and blood" (*L.C., Tri.* p. 767).

The Formula of Concord. Thorough Declaration. Comprehensive Summary... Since for thorough, permanent unity in the Church it is, above all things, necessary that we have a comprehensive, unanimously approved summary and form wherein is brought together from God's Word the common doctrine, reduced to a brief compass, which the churches that are of the true Christian religion confess, just as the ancient Church always had for this use its fixed symbols; moreover, since this (comprehensive form of doctrine) should not be based on private writings, but on such books as have been composed, approved, and received in the name of the churches which pledge themselves to one doctrine and religion, we have declared to one another with heart and mouth that we will not make or receive a separate or new confession of our faith, but confess the public common writings which always and everywhere were held and used as such symbols or common confessions in all the churches of the Augsburg Confession before the dissensions arose among those who accept the Augsburg Confession, and as long as in all articles there was on all sides a unanimous adherence to (and maintenance and use of) the pure doctrine of the divine Word, as the sainted Dr. Luther explained it (*F.C. Tri.* pp. 849-851).

The Formula of Concord. Thorough Declaration. VII. Of the Holy Supper... Since, now, this true, almighty Lord, our Creator and Redeemer, Jesus Christ, after the Last Supper, when He is just beginning His bitter buffering and death for our sins, in those sad last moments, with great consideration and solemnity, in the institution of this most venerable Sacrament, which was to be used until the end of the world with great reverence and obedience (and humility), and was to be an abiding memorial of His bitter suffering and death and all His benefits, a sealing (and confirmation) of the New Testament, a consolation of all distressed hearts, and a firm bond of union of Christians with Christ, their head and with one another, in the ordaining and institution of the Holy Supper spake these words concerning the bread which He blessed and gave (to His disciples): "Take, eat; this is My body, which is given for you," and concerning the cup, or wine: "This is My blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins" (*F.C., Tri.* p. 987).

In the book entitled *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries* (Ehlert, trans. by Nage1, 1966, CPH) the author gives this account of Closed Communion:

It was quite impossible to isolate the Christian congregation from intercourse with its local social surroundings, no matter how desirable that might appear to a man like Hermas. At one point, however, the congregation was uncompromising. Firm boundaries were drawn around participation in the divine service. In the initial mission situation, the apostolic message was given to all who would hear. However, as soon as there were "those within" and "those

without,”² that is, as soon as a congregation felt separated from its surroundings, it conducted a type of divine worship in which the distinction between within and without was made unmistakably clear. Admission was not for just anybody. Origen points out that the Christians are not like the philosophers whom anybody may attend and listen to. The Christians on the contrary test every man first and instruct him privately until he gives demonstration of trustworthiness and an orderly life. Only then is he admitted to their assembly as a “hearer.” This goes only for the Service of the Word composed of hymns, lections, sermon, and prayers. Even this was obviously stoutly hedged about. Those outside were not denied the opportunity of hearing God’s Word, but they must first prove their serious intentions. Following the service of the Word came the celebration of the Eucharist. This was at least so from the middle of the second century (Justin). Before the Eucharist began, however, the “hearers” had to leave the assembly, and not only they but also the catechumens, even though they were already being solidly instructed toward reception. During the Eucharist the doors were guarded by deacons and subdeacons. Tertullian severely rebukes the contrary way of doing things among the heretics, who did not maintain the distinction between catechumens and believers. “They assemble together, listen together, pray together; indeed when heathen come, they cast what is holy to the dogs, and the pearls, which to be sure are not in fact pearls, to the swine” (pp. 75-76)

The strict limitation of participation is clearly evidenced at the end of the apostolic age. It still remains to be shown that it was ever otherwise. The formative influence was not the keeping of secrecy but the keeping of unholy people from what is holy in accordance with the Old Testament understanding of holiness. In the *Didache* we read, “Let no one eat and drink of your Eucharist except those baptized in the name of the Lord; for here the word of the Lord applies ‘Give not that which is holy to the dogs.’”...This is in harmony with the early Christian understanding of Baptism. Christ sanctifies and cleanses His church with the washing of water by the Word (Eph. 5:26). We have further the warning from Paul about the danger of “unworthy” eating and drinking, and he therefore enjoins rigorous self-examination upon every partaker (1 Cor. 11:27ff.). For this reason alone not any curious person could be admitted indiscriminately. The whole congregation is self-evidently together responsible for preventing anybody from ignorantly heaping guilt upon himself. Baptism is the basic requirement. A man baptized is one whose life has been proven and his trustworthiness demonstrated. Instruction has been given him. He has avowed his confession (pp. 77-78).

The *koinonia* of Baptism is undeniably bound up with the *koinonia* of the Holy Communion. *Koinonia* as used by Paul in 1 Cor. 10:16 includes the fellowship of those who partake together (p. 27). As here the participants are bound to one another not by what they do with one another but by their common partaking of the body of Christ, so also the *koinonia* of Baptism rests in their being “baptized into the body of Christ.”...The Holy Communion of the early church is rightly “closed Communion” at least to this extent that no unbaptized person may partake of it. Church fellowship is as much Eucharistic fellowship as Baptismal fellowship and in both cases exclusive.

Nevertheless, both are not the same. Church fellowship based on Baptism became a problem for the early church when it faced the question of recognizing the Baptism of heretics or schismatics upon their entry into the Catholic Church (pp. 78-79).

Here the church also had to make decisions, but the problem was from the outset quite different. A valid Baptism is performed only once, whereas participation in the Holy Communion is

² *hoi exo* and *hoi eso*, 1 Cor. 5:12f. Cf. Col. 4:5; 1 Thess. 4:12; 1 Tim. 3:7; Rev. 22:15.

repeated. The Baptism of the heretics had only to be pronounced valid or not. The same question could naturally be asked of their Eucharist. Augustine considered the question of their sacraments as such, and so the question of validity could be answered as in the case of their Baptism. In Eucharistic practice, however, the question was not about the validity of others' Eucharists but whether heretics or schismatics may be admitted to the Catholic Holy Communion. The question was the same for the others whose churches were regarded as heretical or schismatic by the Catholic side. Here the question is not of validity, which every church naturally claims for its sacraments, but of integrity.

This question was critical for the very reason that the early church still had a vital understanding of the Eucharist as *koinonia*. Is it in harmony with the *koinonia* of the body of Christ that Christians who are not at one should go to the Holy Communion together? By being partakers of the body of Christ in the Eucharist we become of one body (*sussomoi*) with Christ, says Cyril of Jerusalem, and Cyril of Alexandria rightly concludes that we are then "in Christ" of one body (*sussomoi*) with one another (p. 29). The partakers become "one body and one spirit." Therefore there may be nothing separating or dividing them, for that which divides would do injury to the *koinonia* and so to the unity of the body of Christ. Such divisions are a constant danger even among the baptized. Even though a man must first be baptized before he may partake of the Holy Communion, this does not mean that all the baptized may without distinction partake of the Eucharist together.

Divisions can be of various kinds. In the case of heresy it is a confessional division. The extending or refusing of Eucharistic fellowship is then always a confessional act of the whole congregation. In the case of personal divisions there would also be injury of the integrity of the *koinonia*. For this reason the formularies of the early church require that all such divisions be put right before partaking of the Lord's Supper (pp. 79-80).

II. Biblical Basis

While historical evidence for the practice of "close communion" may be very beneficial it can never take the place of biblical evidence. If we thus limit communion to only those who are 1. sorry for their sins, 2. believe on the Lord Jesus Christ for forgiveness, 3. intend to better their lives, 4. believe in the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the sacrament, and 5. share the same faith as we do, we need to know upon what Bible basis we practice such "close communion."

A. Specific References

1 Cor. 11:17-34 (NIV)

¹⁷In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. ¹⁸In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. ¹⁹No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. ²⁰When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, ²¹for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. ²²Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you for this? Certainly not! ²³For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, ²⁴and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. ²⁷Therefore, 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. ²⁸ A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. ²⁹ For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. ³⁰ That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. ³¹ But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. ³² When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world. ³³ So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for each other. ³⁴ If anyone is hungry, he should eat at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment.

From this we learn:

1. *to exclude manifestly impenitent sinners.* Knowingly or unknowingly these Corinthians were sinning against the law of Christian love. If they had examined themselves correctly they would have seen their sin, felt sorry for it, turned to Christ for forgiveness and tried to lead a better life. This is certainly one reason why Paul wrote this letter (v. 33-34). He did not want them to come under God's judgment (v. 29). If Paul could demand that they "expel the wicked man from among you" (5:13) who lived in the manifest sin of having his father's wife (5:1) he most certainly would have enjoined them to exclude from the Lord's Supper those who continued to show outwardly that they were impenitent after dealing with them in this letter.

2. *to exclude those who do not know or refuse to believe in the "real presence" in the Lord's Supper.* Paul had taught them all about the Lord's Supper (23) and yet they had violated its true meaning by their actions. If they had understood and believed that actually in the Lord's Supper they were receiving the precious body and blood of Christ, they would not have acted the way they did (27, 29). The Lord's Supper is intended for Christians who have been instructed and believe the true meaning of it.

3. *to exclude those who do not know or refuse to properly prepare themselves for partaking of the Lord's Supper.* Paul urges the Corinthians to examine themselves before they partake (28). But how can a man examine himself if he does not know how? He must know the law which convicts him of sin and threatens eternal punishment. He must know the gospel which holds out to him the forgiveness of sins which Christ has merited absolutely free of charge. He must know that any and all faith in this forgiveness, by the work of the Holy Spirit, grants him eternal life. He must know that a Christian seeks to better his life out of love for that Savior. He must know the true meaning of the Lord's Supper. If they then have faith in these words "given and shed for you for the remission of sins," they are truly prepared.

4. *to exclude those who do not share the same faith.* This is implicit or implied rather than explicit. One of the purposes of Paul in writing was so that there would be no divisions. He wanted unity of doctrine and practice. He wanted the proclamation of the Lord's death by their use of the Lord's Supper to be a true confession of faith. They had made it extremely unclear. Merely eating and drinking would not proclaim the Lord's death till he come. But with the right understanding of the Lord's Supper and the right partaking of the Lord's Supper it would. When he calls them "my brothers" he implies that they are spiritually one with him.

I Cor. 10:14-22 (NIV)

¹⁴Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry. ¹⁵I speak to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. ¹⁶Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation (*koinonia*) in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation (*koinonia*) in the body of Christ? ¹⁷Because there is one loaf (*artos*), we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake (*metechomen*) of the one loaf. ¹⁸Consider the people of Israel: Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate (*koinonia*) in the altar? ¹⁹Do I mean then that a sacrifice offered to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? ²⁰No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants (*koinonous*) with demons. ²¹You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part (*metechein*)

in both the Lord's table and the table of demons. ²² Are we trying to arouse the Lord's jealousy? Are we stronger than he?

From this we learn that participation in the Lord's Supper makes us one body in and through Christ. There are three unions. First, there is the union of bread with body and blood with wine (16). This is not a natural but a supernatural union. Secondly, there is the union between Christ and the partaker (17). If the partaker received the bread and wine, he also receives the body and blood of Christ. He is thus united with Christ in a special sacramental way which goes beyond a spiritual way by faith (John 6:53). Thirdly, there is a union of all partakers into one body since they all partake of that same bread or loaf (17). They do not produce this body or union. They are rather drawn into it so they become its members. Unworthy communicants although they receive the body and blood with the bread and wine are not united with Christ and are therefore not united with others who participate in a worthy manner, but instead heap judgment of God upon themselves (I Cor. 11:27-29).

Therefore we learn *to exclude those who do not share the same faith*. If those who partake of the Lord's Supper are so closely bound to Christ and through Him bound to each other how can this be if they who participate do not share the same faith. Those who are so closely bound together in Christ will certainly want to be united in faith. For Jesus, their head and master has said, "If you hold to my teaching you are really my disciples" (Jn. 3:31). It is His will that they be united in and through His word. "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth" (Jn.17:17). "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you" (Jn 17:20,21).

From the account of the Lord's Supper in Mt.26:17-30; Mk. 14:12-26; and Lk. 22:7-20, we learn *to practice "close communion."* Here we have three more accounts of what St. Paul wrote about, the institution of the Lord's Supper. We note first of all that Christ begins with a select group of Christians, his disciples, whom he had trained for three years. The Lord's Supper is not intended for everyone like the gospel, or baptism. The Lord's Supper was intended for only certain Christians. Not even the owner of the house in which it was instituted, although known to Christ, was invited. Judas, one of the 12, was excused before the sacrament was given. We must conclude that Jesus, the all knowing Son of God, knew that these eleven were well prepared to receive His body and blood in the sacrament. His words of institution must have given them the faith to believe in the real presence. There was a oneness of faith and doctrine (John 17:8-12). His command to "do this" was a directive not only to them but to the church until the end of time.

Acts 2:41-47 (NIV)

⁴¹ Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. ⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship (*koinonia*), to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

From this we learn that the earliest Christian church founded by the exalted Christ by the operation of the Holy Spirit through the apostles took to heart the directive of Christ, "this do." They partook of the Lord's Supper (the breaking of bread³). These 3,000 Jewish converts with the 120 assembled that day (1:15) not only ate together as an agape feast but also partook of the Lord's Supper as instituted by Christ. What is also significant is that they "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching showing that they were united in one

³ Cf. *Apol. A.C., Tri.* p. 359.

confession of faith. They enjoyed a “fellowship” of believers, a group concerned about one another. They held their separate worship services in the temple. The fruits of their faith was demonstrated by the love that they had for one another. Can we see anything but a “close communion,” a group set apart from the world and from scattered Christians throughout Palestine? Can we see anything but an informed and properly prepared communicant at the Lord’s Supper? In this brief summary of the events of that first pentecost Luke tells us that those who were baptized, those who were instructed, those who enjoyed fellowship also partook of the Lord’s Supper. *It confirms what he have said that the practice of the church was “close communion.”*

B. Other References Related To This Point

Mt. 7:6 (NIV) “Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces.” The truths of the Bible, including the precious Gospel and the sacraments, should not be given to those who like dogs attack every effort to change them or like pigs who could care less that they trample pearls in the mud. For example, Paul met this kind of stubborn opposition from the Jews in Pisidian Antioch and turned his attention to the Gentiles (Acts 13:45). By the practice of “close communion” we have made sure that the precious sacrament is regarded as precious.

1 Cor. 5:11 (NIV) “But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat.” These are not real brothers in faith and life but profess themselves to be brothers. Yet they openly sin, against better knowledge. The Corinthians were not to associate with them, not even to eat with them. And it certainly follows that they were not to partake of the Lord’s Supper with them. The practice of “close communion” excludes such who may be in the pale of Christianity but by their life show their impenitence. What is said about open sin can also be applied to open false doctrine.

2 Th. 3:6 (NIV) “In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us.” These are men, members of the same church, who after repeated attempts to change (1 Th. 5:14; 4:11,12; 2 Th.3:11,12) are still trying to live without working. They are not to be expelled as yet but to have their conscience pricked by the action of the congregation. They would be refused such privileges as participation in the Lord’s Supper and the usual agape meals, until they would demonstrate that they were true spiritual brothers, repentant sinners. For this the writers have the authority of Jesus Christ himself. The practice of “close communion” includes the exclusion of impenitent sinners even within a congregation as a form of church discipline.

Ro. 16:17 (NIV) “I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them.” Paul here warns the fellow Christians of Rome to keep their eyes open for believers who are errorists and teach falsely. They are equipped to do this because they know the true doctrine as it had been taught them. What these errorists do is to divide the unity of faith which the Holy Spirit had built up in them. Upon detection they were to definitely cut off all religious ties. Otherwise it could prove to be a death trap. The practice of “close communion” recognizes errorists within the visible church and deals with them by excluding such from partaking of the Lord’s Supper.

III. Practice

If we are convinced that it is the Lord’s will that we practice “close communion” let us examine ourselves to see how we are doing. Do we assume or do we continually make plain the real meaning of the Lord’s Supper? Do we assume or do we continually teach the oneness we have in Christ and therefore a oneness we have with one another through the sacrament? Do we assume or do we teach the sharing of the same faith as a prerequisite for partaking of the Lord’s Supper? Are we making clear the difference between spiritual or faith fellowship and communion fellowship? Are we making clear that the Lord’s Supper is not just a pep rally where all Christians can participate?

We all have problems in the practice of “close communion”: e.g., instructing our own people, excluding some unexpected visitors from the communion table, giving them adequate reasons, making sure that our members are worthy guests and know all the teachings about the Lord’s Supper, getting communicants to announce ahead of time or registering for communion, the giving and receiving of guest communion cards and their use, etc.

A. To The Church At Large

In producing this paper I have become more convinced that our present liturgy (p. 15ff. *TLH*) leaves much to be desired even with the allowable hymns. It is designed to be an “open” service for all who come to worship and also a “closed” service for communicants. This causes nothing but confusion to any visitor and even among some members. Why not change it to conform more closely to the early church? Why not design the first part of the service for all and the second part only for communicants? Some churches have already done this. This would certainly demonstrate our belief in the practice of “close communion.” Problems of a double dismissal can be met.

Examine carefully the communion service that you use in your church. Does it teach the proper meaning of the Lord’s Supper? The Exhortation on page 47 (*TLH*) combines all of these salient points. But who uses it? It ought to be stressed in every communion service. Some rely upon the hymns that are sung to do this but then what is left out? If we are consistent, salient messages from God’s Word should not be left to chance but be incorporated in the fixed liturgy. I believe that the New Hymnal Committee of Synod should produce, if nothing less, an alternate liturgy for communion services which would reflect a) the proper teaching and celebration of the Lord’s Supper, and b) our practice of “close communion.”

B. To Pastors

If the above could be achieved it could significantly lighten the burden of pastors and churches who practice “close communion.” Years ago required communion announcement to the pastor before communing attempted to do the same thing. However good this custom is even today, it usually falls short of instructing our members as to the proper meaning of the Lord’s Supper. And this needs to be done not simply in instructional classes, and not simply by an occasional sermon, but repeatedly. The safest way to reach all communicants is to incorporate the essentials into the communion service.

In spite of private personal announcements, sign-up sheets or communion registration cards, verbal or printed announcements concerning eligibility for communion, pastors are still faced with the problem of deciding whether to commune a guest visitor. The problem is compounded when they suddenly appear at the table unannounced. However, the practice of “close communion” does not change. Do you have good reason to suppose that this person is properly prepared to receive the Lord’s Supper? Do you have good reason to suppose that this person shares our faith? If you have, commune him. If not, pass him by. There is no good way to do the latter, but a smile and a passing word will help. After the service you can explain.

Perhaps the most difficult case arises when members of other Lutheran church bodies wish to commune. Additional considerations must be given. Will communing at our altar strengthen their faith or will it only minimize our scriptural differences. Are we interfering with another man’s ministry since they still belong to another church? Decency and order would almost dictate that we wait until former ties have been broken.

What has been said about the practice in our own churches also applies to our members when away from home. Properly instructed they will be less likely to attend communion in a church which allows anyone to participate.

May the Lord bless our efforts in faithfully administering this precious gift to the church, the Lord’s Supper, until He comes.

Beautiful Savior Lutheran Church
Summerville, South Carolina