

Close(d) Communion: A Barrier to Outreach?

Concern: “Having Every Sunday Communion would be a roadblock to inviting a friend to church.”

A Preliminary Answer from the Husband of Pastor Eichers’ Kindergarten Teacher

“With the novel emphasis of Sunday worship as a major evangelism tool of the church, a legitimate concern has been raised regarding the frequency of Holy Communion. Of particular importance among WELS and LCMS congregations is the practice of close(d) Communion. This practice emphasizes the Lord’s Supper as a confession of faith as well as a means of grace. Those of the same confession of faith commune together as a statement of that common belief. But some ask what visitors might think if they cannot attend Communion. Although a valid concern, the elimination of the Lord’s Supper for the sake of visitors misses the purpose of the Sacrament. Normally, guests at one’s home do not set the meal schedule or determine the menu. Holy Communion is for the faith-full. It is a statement of what is important for Lutheran believers. Lutheran congregations need to consider how to celebrate the Lord’s Supper in ways that clearly express hospitality to the stranger while maintaining the biblical and Lutheran practice of close(d) Communion.”¹

Playing Church or Secular Building

- What is the goal of Sunday worship?
- For whom is Sunday worship?
- To what can an obsession with being welcoming ultimately lead?

“No” and “Not Yet”

- What’s the difference?
- How might we apply this to our conversations about closed communion?

Communion: Radically Evangelism Oriented

To be ready to receive the Sacrament is to be ready for Christ’s second coming, and we want people to be ready for Christ’s second coming.

The Situation in Corinth

The Eucharist as a Real Encounter with Christ

Open your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 11:27–34

- What warnings do we see in this passage?
- Who might be some who would not be worthy recipients of the Sacrament according to this passage?

Open your Bibles to Hebrews 12:18–29

- In what ways is an encounter with God a terrifying thing?
- What is the thing that draws us to God?
- How are we ready to meet Jesus?

Holy Communion as a “Common Union”

Open your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 10:14–22; 11:23–26

¹ Timothy Maschke, *Gathered Guests: A Guide to Worship in the Lutheran Church* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2003), 465–66.

- What do these passages teach about what believers have in common with one another?
- What do these passages teach about what we confess as we go forth for communion?

Definition from our Bulletins

The Lord’s Supper is celebrated at this congregation in the confession and glad confidence that in Communion we receive not only the bread and wine, but Christ’s very body and blood to eat and drink for the forgiveness of sins. Our Lord invites all those who trust His words, repent of sin, and set aside any refusal to forgive and love as He forgives and loves us.

Holy Communion is a confession of the faith which is confessed at this altar. Those who eat and drink our Lord’s body and blood unworthily do so to their great harm. Any who are not yet instructed (confirmed), in doubt, or who holds a confession differing from this congregation and the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, and yet desire to receive the sacrament, are asked first to speak with the Pastor.

For those who prefer not to drink wine, there is one cup of white grape juice (which contains one drop of wine) in the inner ring of the cup tray. Please register your communion on the Record of Fellowship booklets at the end of the pews. Thank you!

Matthew 28:19–20 and Drinking Scripture to the last Drop

What does teaching everything I have commanded you mean?

Church Fellowship and Telling the Good News about Jesus

Carl C. Fickenscher II, July 17, 2001

...I remember, back when I was a brand-new Sem I student, first year at the seminary, really naive, talking to another first-year student, an equally reliable theologian, about various evangelism methods. Kennedy was big back then.² My friend’s words of wisdom were, “You just give it to ‘em down and dirty at first, then you clean up the theology later.” I nodded in agreement. Boy, was I dumb! “Teaching them to observe all things” is not an afterthought; it’s the Great Commission; it’s cutting- edge evangelism....

To appreciate why our Synod’s fellowship practices are so vital to fulfilling the Great Commission, it’s first crucial to appreciate that teaching all things is an essential part of the Great Commission....

Because, quite simply, Jesus knew that clean theology is what gets people to heaven....

No one ever comes to faith in Christ by anything false he’s been taught. Only the truth creates and sustains faith....

It was not when a revival preacher falsely invited the audience to come forward and accept Christ that people became believers; it was when, earlier in his sermon, he proclaimed the cross that the Holy Spirit created faith in their hearts. It was not by the faith of the parents that a baby baptized in a Presbyterian church was saved; it was by the washing of regeneration in the child’s heart, even though the congregation denies it. We sincerely rejoice with the angels in heaven when a sinner comes to repentance at the preaching of an ELCA pastor, but that new faith was in no way enhanced by the fact that the pastor was a woman. It’s the truth, not errors intermingled with the truth, that fulfills the Great Commission....

That is to say, as John does about his Gospel, “These things”—all these things—“are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life

in His name” (John 20:31). That’s evangelism. That’s “Telling the Good News about Jesus.” Every word, every doctrine, of Scripture, God gave for one purpose: the salvation of souls... We don’t always understand fully, but nothing is expendable. God didn’t give a single word, a single doctrine, for *His* good. Somehow every teaching leads us to Christ....

For starters, can there be any doubt that souls are spending eternity in hell because our dear, sincere Baptist friends didn’t baptize thousands and thousands of babies? Haven’t some been lost? Or have you ever counseled with one of your college students who was now questioning his salvation because of what friends at school said? His friends believe that revival preacher and told your young man he wasn’t really saved unless he made a decision for Christ....

When truth is compromised for error, ultimately other truth will be lost. As Paul says in Galatians, “A little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough” (Galatians 5:9)....

We all want to be out there, sharing Christ, seizing every opportunity to proclaim the Gospel to as wide an audience as possible....

These are all opportunities, it would seem, to do precisely what we need to do, “teach them.” But there’s that troublesome fellowship practice of ours getting in the way....

for me as a pastor, evangelism was not primarily Friendship Sundays and flashy ads and hot programs that got people in the door. For the most part, it wasn’t even those special settings for proclamation. An awful lot of evangelism was sitting down in the homes, talking, asking and answering questions. Teaching—adult instruction class two hours a week for nearly four months, teaching about the Trinity and creation, the Ten Commandments, the redeeming work of the Son, the Holy Spirit, the sacraments, prayer, liturgy. Then there was Baptism or confirmation. That was evangelism. Teaching them to observe all things....

Now, then, a new visitor comes to worship and presents himself for Communion. He’s Baptist or Methodist or ELCA. If, knowingly, I let him commune, how will I answer my adult class members this week when they ask, “What do Baptists or Methodists or ELCA Lutherans believe? Does infant Baptism really matter? How about the real presence? Is homosexuality still wrong? Oh, and how about the Third Commandment and justification and prayer?” ... By the way, you notice that I said “unbelievers.” The waters become very muddied if we forget we’re trying to win *unbelievers* for Christ. See, we’re often afraid that our fellowship practices will offend people. But whom would we offend? And with whom might we commune and lead worship? Very few among us would consider communing or leading worship with open unbelievers. The issue is whether we admit *other Christians* to our altars and pulpits. They’re the ones some might bend the policy to avoid offending. But what we’ve just said is that they’re already Christians. They’re not the souls we’re hoping to win for Christ. We don’t want to confuse LCMS evangelism with simply increasing our numbers at the expense of another Christian church’s. Of course, we always welcome Christians who come to us from other denominations, but for only one reason. Not for numbers, but that they may now share in the *pure* preaching of the Gospel and administration of the sacraments....

I said before that for me as a pastor, an awful lot of evangelism was all that visiting and teaching I did with prospects. The other thing that “doing evangelism” meant for me as a pastor was this: educating and motivating my own members to “Tell the Good News about Jesus” every day at work, at school, wherever God put them. Here, too, for our own members, our fellowship practices not only enhance but are necessary to “teach all things.” ... remember—“Curtis Mathis: the most expensive name in television and darn well worth it.” Their profits soared. Now, we in

the Missouri Synod are not going for snob appeal, and we’re certainly not expensive. But we do have something on which we are very strong, and we should be aware of it and feature it. It’s our doctrine.

Everyday Table Fellowship leads to Sacred Table Fellowship

- Where is it that the most fruitful evangelism conversations have taken place?
- Is it true that Church is open to everybody and everyone is welcome, but for some people, they may not be ready even for a non-communion service? How might we help walk them closer to that?

Every. Single. Visitor follow up I have with a worship guest that I have turned away from the altar has as its ultimate goal admittance to the Lord’s Supper. However, I don’t get to set the criteria for admittance—the Lord Jesus Christ does.

Rosaria’s Story

- Out Lesbian Feminist who taught at Syracuse University from ‘92–‘02
- Faculty advisor for LGBTQ student groups
- Wrote article criticizing the Christian Evangelical Group “Promise Keepers,” received an avalanche of both hate mail and fan mail for it.
- One critical letter stood out, Pastor Ken Smith invited her to his house for dinner and conversation.
- Rosaria was doing research on a book which discussed how the religious right was ruining America, so thought it would be a good research opportunity.
- Kept on coming back to dinner, would witness their family devotions, but it wasn’t until much later that she even set foot inside their church.
- She converted to Christianity in ‘99, married in ‘01 to a pastor (Kent Butterfield). Views Christian hospitality (think table fellowship) as a key ministry.

Midwest Nice

(And other ways to tell me you’re passive aggressive... without telling me you’re passive aggressive, of course.)

Discussion: why is closed communion such a difficult topic with friends and family?

“so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,” (Ephesians 4:14–15, ESV)

“but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect,” (1 Peter 3:15, ESV)

“Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.” (Galatians 6:1, ESV)

“And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.” (1 Thessalonians 5:14, ESV)

“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:26–27, ESV)