

Agreement in Our Practice of Closed Communion

1. The confessional Lutheran church always has taught and practiced, and will teach and practice, what is known as closed communion. By closed communion we are indicating that the administration and reception of the Lord's Supper at a given altar is to occur only with those who profess the same doctrine.
2. This practice of closed communion is derived from Scripture itself (1 Corinthians 10:17, 11:17-18, 11:23-32; also Ephesians 4:3, 1 Corinthians 1:10, Romans 16:17-18).
3. This practice is furthermore derived, in a secondary manner, from our Lutheran Confessions. Here we refer especially to FC SD VII: 88-90 and FC SD VII: 123.
4. The main reason for practicing closed communion is out of concern for those who commune to procure the *benefits* from the Sacrament of the Altar and not to partake of the Supper to one's *harm*. In 1 Corinthians 11:29, the apostle Paul warns of a person receiving the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Supper as a "judgment on himself." Pastors of congregations, as gatekeepers of a proper administration of the sacrament, are especially concerned about proper reception at the Supper. Therefore, in love, they admit only those who are properly trained and able to examine themselves accordingly.
5. The unity in confession is also of great concern for the celebration of Holy Communion. As the word "communing" implies, the Supper also serves as a testimony of fellowship in doctrine with fellow communicants at a particular altar and, by extension, altars inside the larger fellowship.
6. Our practice of fellowship is of great concern especially because of the paramount nature of the chief article of the Christian faith (*Hauptartikel*, the doctrine of justification), and also out of conscientious commitment to *all* of the teachings in the Word of God (1 Corinthians 1:10, Romans 16:17; FC X:31).
7. Our 2001 ELS *Explanation of Luther's Small Catechism* contains the question:

Whom should we not admit to the Lord's Supper?¹

We should not admit to the Lord's Supper

those who do not believe in the Real Presence of Christ's body and blood,

those who are known to be ungodly and impenitent,

those who have given offense and have not removed it,

those who are not able to examine themselves, or

those who are of a different confession, since the Lord's Supper is a testimony of the unity of faith. (Q 330)

The matter of confessional unity is addressed in the fifth point.

¹ We also draw attention here to the 20 questions of Dr. Luther: "Christian Questions and Answers," p. 30-32 in the 2001 ELS *Explanation of Luther's Small Catechism*. The correct answers to these questions are seen as basic for a proper reception of the Sacrament of the Altar.

8. A person's membership in a church body means something. In general, we must say that one has not self-examined properly when there is disregard for the way church membership has a bearing on one's public confession of the Christian faith.
9. It is our practice to commune at our altars only those who agree with us in doctrine. That agreement readily shows itself by publicly aligning their communicant membership with church bodies with whom we are in fellowship (e.g., churches that comprise the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference [CELFC]).
10. A necessary custom for our synod's congregations is the inclusion of regular announcements on closed communion in Sunday bulletins. It also is wise for pastors to mention the practice orally just prior to the first table being communed. ("The communicants of our doctrinal fellowship - members of the ELS and the WELS - are now invited to come forward to the altar.")
11. In a rare exception where one is admitted to the Lord's Supper who *formally* is not a member of the ELS/WELS/CELFC but whose informal confession of faith is taken into consideration, this is not to be seen as setting aside the rule of closed communion.² In fact, whenever a private, pastoral judgment is made in a special case, where also the elders are informed, the "exception to the rule" should not be widely publicized lest undue offense be given.
12. When such an exception might be made,³ our confessional Lutheran pastors will do all that they can to lead those for whom they have permanent or temporary oversight

² We note here, "A Reply of the WELS Commission on Inter-Church Relations and the ELS Board for Theology and Church Relations," issued in November of 1975:

Do we hold that the exercise of church fellowship, especially prayer and altar fellowship, can be decided in every instance solely on the basis of formal church membership, that is, on whether or not the person belongs to a congregation or synod in affiliation with us?

No. Ordinarily this is the basis on which such a question is decided since church fellowship is exercised on the basis of one's confession to the pure marks of the church, and ordinarily we express our confession by our church membership. There may be cases in the exercise of church fellowship where a person's informal confession of faith must also be considered. This is especially true regarding the weak. But whether one is guided by a person's formal or informal confession of faith, in either instance it must in principle be a confession to the full truth of God's Word. In addition, special care must be exercised so as not to cause offense to others or to interfere with another man's ministry. Further, we are not to judge harshly concerning the manner in which a brother pastor after much agonizing handles such difficult cases. (*Lutheran Sentinel* 59, no. 14 [July 22, 1976]: 220-221; *Evangelical Lutheran Synod, Synod Report, 1976: 65*).

³ Two examples of exceptions may be offered:

- a. "One Sunday the young pastor is in the church sacristy minutes before the worship service (with the Lord's Supper) is to begin. An elderly couple in their 80s, long-time members of the congregation, enters. A third person is with them, another elderly woman who was a visitor that morning. The woman who was a member of the church said with some emotion, 'Pastor, this is my sister Edith. She has been visiting for the last two weeks. It's the first time we have seen each other in nearly 20 years. She lives in western Canada. She is a member of the Lutheran Church of Canada, but only because there are no Wisconsin Synod churches nearby. I know that she believes exactly as she always did and exactly as I do. This afternoon she will be going back home, and I know that today is the last time we will ever see each other again. Pastor, could she please take Communion with us today?' The pastor saw the tears in both of their eyes and heard the quiver in the voice. He knew that to say 'no' would be devastating to the faith of these two believers. He also knew that there was little, if any, possibility of public offense. The service was about to begin in moments. He said yes, she was welcome to share in Communion. The young pastor felt strongly that he did the right thing, but doubts about his decision kept arising. So later that week, he shared the incident and his decision with his church council and said, 'I am fully committed to our synod's teachings on fellowship and I am fully convinced that the practice of closed Communion is a correct one. But I felt that this case was an exception, and

responsibility toward a greater understanding of God's word and consistency of practice.

13. Care must be taken that we do not quickly pass judgment on a fellow pastor when we hear of a particular case of casuistry and how it was handled in a sister congregation. We must admit that we do not know all the circumstances leading to the rare exception. We should content ourselves that we are, however, agreed in the scriptural principles.
14. It should go without saying, but for clarity here needs to be said, that any "exception to the rule" in admitting a certain individual at a given altar, when reflectively permitted, does not constitute what is called "selective fellowship." Selective fellowship is an expression used for situations where *congregations* from church bodies not in fellowship with each other, but who assume they are, proceed with their own local fellowship arrangements, e.g., exchanging of pulpits, joint worship services, and indiscriminate communing.
15. Non-fellowship Lutheran guests who regularly or seasonally attend our synod's congregations are not normally invited to commune at our altars. Yet they are in need of conscientious pastoral care and instruction. Such pastoral care includes - among other things - sharing pertinent information concerning doctrinal differences, explaining fully our practice of closed communion, and working toward securing true unity in the confession of the faith. The pastor necessarily will explain that, if in his judgment an exception to the rule is made, this indicates they do not intend to commune at heterodox altars.
16. Finally, may our healthy discussion on this matter serve to refresh us in a renewed appreciation for the extreme value of the Supper. For in Holy Communion we receive Christ's true body and true blood (real presence), whereby the gracious forgiveness of sins is offered and received by faith for the strengthening of souls!
17. May the careful practice we observe in administering the Holy Supper also serve as a wonderful "teaching moment" for all that is encompassed in a blessed communing.⁴ Thereby souls are edified and God truly is glorified.

to do otherwise would not have been loving or God-pleasing. If I made the wrong decision, please correct me.' To a man they told their pastor he had done the right thing. Still not fully assured, the young pastor went to his next pastors' conference - known at the time as one of the most conservative and traditional in the synod. He did the same thing as he did with his council, and asked the same question. 'Brothers, did I do the right thing?' Every pastor assured the young man that his decision was correct..." (Emmaus Conference essay, May 6, 2011, Rev. Mark G. Schroeder).

- b. When a pastor arrived at his third parish, he asked to see the membership roster. He noticed that the name of a certain elderly lady was listed with an asterisk next to her name. She was a shut-in and had been so for years. The pastor was informed as to the reason for the asterisk: Technically she had never taken her membership out of a non-fellowship Lutheran church about 50 miles away. She owned a burial plot at that church's cemetery. The council let the new pastor know she was regarded by all as a "communicant" of the congregation; she identified completely with the congregation at hand on all points of doctrine, had been ministered to regularly by former pastors, and did not attend or commune at her former church. She had been considered for years to be a rostered "member" of our synod's congregation. The newly arriving pastor, understanding the situation, naturally continued to acknowledge the shut-in as a proper communicant of Faith Lutheran.

⁴ The Circuit Visitors at its annual conference, September 15-16, 2016, expressed the continual need to encourage all of our pastors and congregations to adhere to our synod's scriptural doctrine and practice of closed Communion.