



# **Closed Communion in Contemporary Context**

A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations  
of Lutheran Church–Canada, January 1999  
Adopted at the Fifth Convention of Lutheran Church–Canada, June 10-14, 1999  
for reference and guidance

## ABBREVIATIONS

Citations from the Lutheran Confessions are taken from *The Book of Concord*, translated and edited by Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959). The following abbreviations are used:

A C	Augsburg Confession
Apol	Apology of the Augsburg Confession
Ep	Epitome of the Formula of Concord
F C	Formula of Concord
L C	Large Catechism
SA	Smalcald Articles
SC	Small Catechism
SD	Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord
Tr	Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope

Citations from Luther are from *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols. (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia Publishing House and Fortress (Muhlenberg) Press, 1955-85), abbreviated *LW*.

Published by:  
Lutheran Church–Canada  
3074 Portage Ave,  
Winnipeg, Manitoba  
R3K 0Y2

Copyright © 2000 Lutheran Church–Canada

# CLOSED COMMUNION IN CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

## A summary statement

Lutheran Church–Canada is a Synod of the Lutheran Confessions. Its pastors, teachers and congregations, by their subscription to these confessions, have placed themselves under the rule of faith set forth therein. As Synod discusses the issue of closed communion, it does so on the basis of the Scriptures as interpreted by the Confessions, which it testifies to be a true interpretation of the Scriptures. In doing so it recognizes the importance of being truly catholic (i.e. universal, orthodox) and apostolic in its practice.

Accordingly we reaffirm the practice of closed communion, that is, restricting access to the Sacrament of the Altar to those who with one voice “proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes” (1 Cor. 11:26). No precedent exists in the tradition of orthodox teaching and practice for unrestricted access to the Sacrament, even for the baptized. Rather, those called to be “stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Cor. 4:1) are entrusted with the duty to catechize those who have not yet been instructed in the truly orthodox rule of faith in order that they may boldly confess their faith in the midst of a faithful congregation, and to exclude those not yet properly catechized, as well as the manifestly impenitent.

In our pluralistic culture, it is tempting to abandon this practice in view of the fear of creating offense. However, in a society which has in many ways abandoned not only the quest for absolute truth but even the hope that such truth can be discovered, it is more important than ever to declare boldly to the world, “This we believe.” We believe in Jesus Christ, true God and true Man, who shed His blood for the forgiveness of our sins, and who gives us His true body and blood in His Supper as a pledge of that forgiveness. We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church, into which Christ gathers us by His Gospel, giving His gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation to His people, and bringing them into communion with Himself, making them part of His mystical body, of which He is the glorious and ever-living Head. To practice closed communion is to be faithful to that confession.

# THE SACRAMENT OF UNITY IN A DIVIDED CHRISTENDOM: Closed communion in contemporary context

## Introduction

The impetus for this document has come from a resolution of the 1991 convention of the Alberta–British Columbia District of Lutheran Church–Canada which requested that, in view of the diversity of practices in LCC regarding closed communion, the Commission on Theology and Church Relations prepare a document on the subject. Both the overture that served as the basis for the resolution and the resolution itself recognized that many congregations in LCC have abandoned or modified the traditional practice of closed communion. This document, prepared in response to that request, seeks to examine the practice of Lutheran Church–Canada to determine if it is in fact in total conformity with the Scriptures and with the Confessions.

Even as this document is being studied, it should be remembered that Lutheran Church–Canada already has a communion practices document. In May of 1983 the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod published the document, “Theology and Practice of the Lord’s Supper.” This document was received by the 1983 synodical convention for study and response, and by the 1986 convention for reference and guidance. At the first regular convention of LCC (1990) this document was accepted along with all LCMS CTCR documents in the same sense in which it was originally received (Resolution 90:1.02).

If LCC has one document on the subject, why does it need another? The original document does an excellent job of wrestling with the issues. Nevertheless, in view of the request of the Canadian church for further study on the issue, the CTCR of Lutheran Church–Canada has sought to prepare a document that 1) will in straightforward language answer the questions, “What is biblical?” “What is confessional?” and then 2) give some suggestions as to how to put this truth into practice. In so far as it is possible, this document seeks to meet concerns of a specifically Canadian context. How is the situation here different from that of the United States, and from other cultures in which the church has practiced closed communion? Behind some of the issues lie such questions as: Does this different context make changes in current practice advisable, or even necessary? What limitations do the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions place on the celebration and administration of the Lord’s Supper in view of the fact that the right preaching of the Gospel and proper administration of the sacraments are “sufficient”

for the unity of the church (AC VII)? What “rites and ceremonies” attached to the Lord’s Supper are adiaphora (neither commanded nor forbidden by the Scriptures)? To this end, this document does not supplant its predecessor, but merely supplements it.

Answers to the questions concerning communion practices, including the practice of closed communion, must be given in accordance with the Scriptures as expounded in the Lutheran Confessions. Therefore, it is necessary to lay the groundwork for the discussion by noting the basic principles of interpretation by which the Lutheran Church operates, so that these principles can then be put to use in answering questions concerning communion practices.

For purposes of this discussion, the term “closed communion” is being used in place of the more common “close communion” or the increasingly used “close(d) communion,” because 1) it is theologically more precise and less prone to misinterpretation, and 2) it is the term that Lutherans have traditionally used to refer to the practice.<sup>1</sup> The term refers to the practice of admitting to the Sacrament those who are incorporated into the same confessional fellowship and excluding those who are not. While the term “close communion” in Lutheran circles originally meant nothing different than the original “closed communion,” the attempt to add an experiential element to the meaning of the term, namely the “closeness” with one another experienced by those who receive the Sacrament, makes it advisable to return to the use of the original term, which best sums up the biblical data and which is linguistically more precise.

As the title of this document notes, the problem of closed communion becomes a point of discussion for Christians because the one holy catholic<sup>2</sup> and apostolic church is confessionally divided on earth. That confessional division has significance for the proclamation of the Gospel in all of its articles, including the article of the Lord’s Supper. The church, therefore, is faced with the problem of confessing the truth over against error while at the same time joyfully dispensing and receiving the gifts that God gives to His people. In view of the current pluralistic climate in our society, it has been asked: Is the traditional practice of closed communion still the best (or only) way to deal with this particular tension? This is a key question for this document.

---

<sup>1</sup> Norman Nagel notes that the term “close communion” is of Baptist origin, entering Lutheran language only in the 20th century, and only in the English language. In Missouri Synod circles, the term became widespread because of its use in John Pritz, *Pastoral Theology* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1932), 130. For a brief history of the introduction of the term to Lutheranism see Norman Nagel, “Closed Communion: In the Way of the Gospel; In the Way of the Law,” *Concordia Journal* 17 (January 1991): 27-28, note 12.

<sup>2</sup>The term “catholic,” from the Greek term meaning “universal” (literally, “according to wholeness”), expresses the reality that the church strictly speaking transcends all boundaries of space and time. The term may also be used to refer to the faithful church as it exists on earth (the “church catholic”), to the universal scope of the preaching of the Gospel with all which that implies (“catholic teaching”), to the wholeness of Christian teaching, and to those practices which derive from the pure teaching of the Gospel and which the church catholic has recognized to be such (“catholic practice”). The definition of catholicity promulgated by St. Vincent of Lerins, namely that which is taught or done “always, everywhere, and by all,” is inadequate since even the doctrine of the Gospel has not been taught “always, everywhere, and by all” within the church on earth; therefore it would be better to describe the term as referring to that which is to be taught or done always, everywhere, and by all, namely that which has its origin in the teaching of the apostles and prophets, which is found in Holy Scripture. Catholicity thus becomes synonymous with orthodoxy.

## Basic Lutheran presuppositions

Article II of the Constitution of LCC recognizes the Scriptures of the Old and the New Testament as the written Word of God and the only rule and norm of our faith and practice, and that the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (the “Lutheran Confessions”) are a true and unadulterated statement and exposition of the Word of God. Such a statement of faith is consistent with Lutheran teaching ever since Reformation times, and is essentially a repetition of the statement in the Rule and Norm in the Formula of Concord. In the disputes with other portions of Christendom, the Lutheran Confessors saw it as necessary to profess the faith taught in the Holy Scriptures over against the misinterpretations of others. The Confessors have noted these symbols to be “a summary formula and pattern, unanimously approved, in which the summarized doctrine commonly confessed by the churches of the pure Christian religion is drawn together out of the Word of God” (SD Rule and Norm 1). The theologians and princes of the Lutheran Church signed the Confessions as a statement that they were a proper exposition of the Word of God. In the centuries since they were first gathered together in *The Book of Concord*, pastors and congregations of the Lutheran Church have continued to do the same.

The Confessions, therefore, though normed by Scripture, themselves interpret Scripture. Since the pastors and congregations of the church have subscribed to the Lutheran Confessions, they declare their belief that the Confessions properly interpret the scriptural data on the Lord’s Supper, as well as all other articles pertaining to the doctrine of the Gospel. Therefore, nothing in the practice of a Lutheran congregation is to undermine or contradict that teaching. Having recognized that the Confessions are a true exposition of Scripture, confessional Lutherans are bound to interpret Scripture in accordance with the Confessions.

The Confessions, as do the Scriptures, insist that there is a solid theological foundation upon which the church’s practice is to be based, namely the Word of God. “Theological issues,” therefore, are not abstract concepts which have little or nothing to do with the day to day life of the people of God, but in fact are the issues that intimately affect the church, for a “theological” question is simply any question that asks, “What does God have to say about that?” To say, then, that the celebration of the Lord’s Supper is a “theological issue” is to say that proper celebration is governed by God’s instructions, not by the ever-changing cultural climate.

Lutherans also take the traditions of the church seriously, recognizing that we do not worship in a vacuum of contemporaneity. Lutherans have always emphasized their place within the church catholic, that is, within the church built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets. Lutherans of course recognize the necessity for “reforming” the church, that is, discovering and removing those accretions over the years which contradict or obscure the Gospel; but the Lutheran Reformation has always been a conservative reformation, one which will seek to preserve those traditions which mark the continuity between the church of the past and the church of the present; that is, those traditions which have been handed down to us from the apostles and are given to us in the Scriptures. This healthy respect for tradition also recognizes that the church of earlier times has much to tell us as to how certain scriptural principles are to be applied in the church today. Therefore, any desire to change the established practice of the church must take the established practice

seriously, seek to discover the theological basis for that past practice, and then determine if the church was in error in making that application. Such a procedure safeguards the church against being “trendy,” that is, allowing its teachings and/or practice to be determined by the world and its agenda, and forever seeking to make itself “relevant” to the current cultural climate. Though the Gospel indeed is to be communicated in such a way as to be heard and understood in the contemporary cultural context, the content of the message and the church’s practice are to be dictated by the Word of God, not by the culture.

In any discussion of the place of tradition in the church it is important to remember that the word has several different meanings for the church. Those things which have been “handed down” include the Scriptures themselves, as well as the correct teaching concerning the Lord’s Supper. Those things of divine origin which have been handed down from the apostles and the correct interpretation of such belong to *the tradition* of the church. At the same time, the term is also used to refer to mere custom.

The church must guard against maintaining tradition in the sense of custom for its own sake. Situations do change. Cultures change. If certain traditions have a cultural rather than a theological base, they may become a barrier to the proclamation of the Gospel. If so, they need to be re-examined. If those traditions have become inimical to the Gospel and no longer serve its proclamation, those traditions must be abandoned for the sake of the Gospel.

However, a distinction must be made between tradition which takes the form of various rites and ceremonies on the one hand, and the practice of the church catholic on the other hand. Rites, ceremonies, and customs may continue from generation to generation, sometimes without critical analysis, but when external circumstances change they may be abandoned. The Confessions are clear that the true unity of the church does not depend upon agreement in rites and ceremonies (AC VII), namely those rites and ceremonies that are of human, not divine, origin.

Practice, however, is based upon what the church professes. The Scriptures are to be our source and norm for practice as well as for doctrine, because practice is based upon doctrine. Thus, practice is derived from the Word of God, either by explicit command or by implication from other clear statements of Scripture. Properly understood, “practice” is not just “what we do,” but what is required because of what we believe. This definition must not be confused with the common use of the term, when “practice” may refer to local customs as well as to universal practice; e.g. “It is our practice to kneel when receiving the Lord’s Supper.” Though we kneel because of what we believe, it is not required because of the doctrine; the Scriptures do not mandate the practice.

Some of those who would abandon closed communion see it as a custom which served the church well in the past, but which has outlived its usefulness. They suggest that in a pluralistic culture such as ours the practice causes offense and thus distracts from the good news the church is called to proclaim. It becomes necessary, then, to examine the nature of the practice of closed communion to determine if it is a man-made custom which may be abandoned in view of current circumstances, or if in fact it is a practice which is derived from the very nature of the Lord’s Supper. In other words: Is closed communion a man-made option or a divinely instituted necessity?

## I. The theological basis of the Lord's Supper

Our Lord Jesus Christ, on the night when He was betrayed, took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and gave it to the disciples and said: "Take, eat; this is My body, which is given for you. This do in remembrance of me." In the same way also He took the cup after supper, and when He had given thanks, He gave it to them saying: "Drink of it, all of you; this is My blood of the new testament, which is shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."<sup>3</sup>

The theological basis for the proper celebration of the Lord's Supper is found in the words of institution. The words presented in the liturgy are a conflation (fusion) of the words as recorded in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and in 1 Corinthians. Discussion of the place of the Lord's Supper among other meals hosted by Jesus and of the implications of the "Bread of Life" discourse in John 6 for the Lord's Supper may be instructive,<sup>4</sup> but these meals are not the Lord's Supper, so such discussions can play no part in setting the norm for our practice.

Luther notes the essence of the Supper in the Small Catechism when he declares, "Instituted by Christ Himself, it is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, under the bread and wine, given to us Christians to eat and drink" (SC VI.1). The benefits of the Sacrament are bound up in the words "for you" and "for the forgiveness of sins," for "By these words the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given to us in the Sacrament, for where there is forgiveness of sins, there are also life and salvation" (SC VI.6). Those words "for you" refer to the true body and blood of Christ which are eaten and drunk by the communicant. Lutherans refer to the fact that in, with and under the bread and wine the body and blood of Christ are truly present (that is, that the elements being received by the mouth *are* the body and blood of Christ) as the "Real Presence."

Luther goes on to declare, "These words, when accompanied by the bodily eating and drinking, are the chief thing in the sacrament, and he who believes these words has what they say and declare: the forgiveness of sins" (SC VI.8). God gives the gifts:

---

<sup>3</sup> *Lutheran Worship* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1982), 171.

<sup>4</sup> Though the controversies of the Reformation era led Lutheran exegetes to reject John 6 as eucharistic, since the significance of the sacrament can only be found in the words of institution, there are some who suggest the possibility that the words that offended the people in Capernaum, the declaration that Jesus' disciples must eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood (John 6:53-54), find their fulfillment in the Supper instituted by our Lord.

the body and blood of Christ. The mouth receives them, and faith profits by them. Worthiness to receive the Sacrament is predicated upon faith, not works, and specifically upon faith in the words “for you” and “for the forgiveness of sins” (SC VI.10). The communicant does not contemplate the possibility of the Real Presence or ponder how such things could be; he simply trusts the words of Christ.

Because God gives us the forgiveness of sins in the Sacrament, Luther calls the Sacrament the “food of the soul,” that which “nourishes and strengthens the new man” (LC V.23). It is given as “a daily food and sustenance so that our faith may refresh and strengthen itself and not weaken in the struggle but grow consistently stronger” (LC V.24). Thus, the Lord’s Supper, which gives us the forgiveness of sins which brings us out of death to life, also sustains us in the new life we now have. It is a “pure, wholesome, soothing medicine which aids and quickens us in both soul and body. For where the soul is healed, the body has benefitted also” (LC V.68).

The essence of the Lord’s Supper is reaffirmed in the Augsburg Confession. Here, the confessors show that they stand firmly in the tradition of the church catholic when they declare, “It is taught among us that the true body and blood of Christ are really present in the Supper of our Lord under the form of bread and wine and are there distributed and received” (AC X.1). Though they elsewhere condemn the Roman sacrifice of the Mass (SA II.II.1-7) and the Roman doctrine of transubstantiation, which seeks to explain the manner by which bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ (SA III.VI.5), the confessors here affirm the reality of the presence of the body and blood of Christ with the earthly elements of bread and wine. The catholicity of the Lutheran view is seen in the fact that the Roman Confutation, written in response to the Augsburg Confession, accepts the article on the Lord’s Supper. In noting this, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession declares that they stand both with the Roman Church and the Greek Church in declaring that “in the Lord’s Supper the body and blood of Christ are truly and substantially present and are truly offered with those things that are seen, the bread and wine, to those who receive the sacrament” (Apol X.1-2). The Apology even approvingly cites one Greek father who speaks about the bread being “truly changed into flesh” (Apol X.2). Any statement which declares the bread and wine to be mere signs or symbols of the body and blood of Christ (as the followers of John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli assert) is specifically condemned here, and in much more detail in the Formula of Concord (FC VII).

The Lutheran Church has always recognized that a denial of the Real Presence in fact distorts the Gospel, since the Lord’s Supper is a means by which the Gospel comes to us. Indeed, Luther went so far as to say that the Lord’s Supper *is* the Gospel.<sup>5</sup> During the time of the “Crypto-Calvinistic” controversy faculty members at the University of Wittenberg who denied the Real Presence or who spoke in language so vague that both the Lutherans and Calvinists could accept the terms used were dismissed from their positions because it was recognized that such views and such language undermined the Gospel.

---

<sup>5</sup>In “The Adoration of the Sacrament” (1523) Luther speaks out against those who try to have a sacrament without the word. He refers to the words of institution as “the sum and substance of the whole gospel.” However, when the clear meaning of the words of institution is rejected, he declares, “The result is that faith has been lost and the sacrament has been turned into a purely external work devoid of faith.” *LW* 36:277. Later, while speaking out against the Roman understanding of the sacrifice of the Mass, he urges the Bohemian Brethren, “You should hold fast to the word that says: ‘Take and eat, this is My body.’ This word is the whole gospel. You will observe and understand that it says nothing about a sacrifice or a good work but about a present and a gift, which Christ offers and gives to us, and which we should receive and with faith appropriate and hold fast” (*LW* 36:288).

The modern ecumenical age has led some theologians to seek ways to reconcile Lutheran and Reformed views on the Real Presence and to open the way for communion between Lutherans and Reformed. A brief examination of one such attempt would be instructive for showing the basis upon which such discussions take place. The Leuenberg Concord, which came out of Lutheran-Reformed dialogue in Germany between 1969 and 1973, discussed the impetus toward agreement, noting that, in view of such issues as “advances in biblical research,” (earlier drafts had specifically mentioned historical critical methodology) and in other experiences in the post-Reformation era, “they [the churches involved] have learned to distinguish between the fundamental witness of the Reformation confessions of faith and their historically conditioned thought forms.”<sup>6</sup> In its discussion of the Lord’s Supper, the document moves the essence of the Supper from the real presence of the body and blood of Christ eaten and drunk with the bread and wine to a focus on the presence of the Risen Christ at the table, stating that He “imparts Himself in His body and blood,” and that He “gives Himself unreservedly to all who receive the bread and wine; faith receives the Lord’s Supper for salvation, unfaith for judgment.” It finally declares, “Where such a consensus exists between the churches, the condemnations pronounced by the Reformation confessions are inapplicable to the doctrinal position of these churches.”<sup>7</sup>

The Lutheran churches which signed the Leuenberg Concord do stand in the tradition of a certain strain of Lutheranism. They stand with the compromising position of Melancthon, the subjectivism of Pietism, and with the less than truly sacramental theology of Samuel Simon Schmucker’s “American Lutheranism.”<sup>8</sup> However, they do not stand in the tradition of the orthodox teaching set forth in the Lutheran Confessions.

In contrast to such agreements, the Lutheran Confessions are very clear in noting that their “thought forms” on this issue are based on a thorough exegesis of the texts, and as such are not “historically conditioned.” In fact, they steadfastly refuse to seek any philosophical explanation as to how the Real Presence takes place. The simple words of institution as repeated by Luther in the Small Catechism are a declaration of what is given, namely the body and blood of Christ, and are meant to be believed, not analyzed or allegorized. The Confessions are also quite clear in noting what views are to be rejected. The Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord (SD VII.113-27) lists sixteen specific errors of the “Sacramentarians” (Reformed) which are to be rejected because they misinterpret the words of institution by allegorizing and spiritualizing them and thus make the essence of the Sacrament

---

<sup>6</sup> “The text of The Leuenberg Concord, in “Ecumenical Chronicle,” *Ecumenical Review* 25 (July 1973): 356.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 357.

<sup>8</sup> Melancthon continued to tinker with the Augsburg Confession long after the Lutheran princes had subscribed to it, and altered Article X in such a way that those who held to a mere symbolic presence could subscribe to it; hence it is necessary for us to refer to ourselves as the Church of the *Unaltered* Augsburg Confession! Pietism sought comfort in subjective feeling rather than in the forgiveness of sins offered in the means of grace. Schmucker, in his efforts to unite all of Christendom in North America, claimed to have found five errors in the Augsburg Confession, including the teaching regarding the Real Presence. By his denials he overthrew the rule of faith as proclaimed by the Lutheran Church, and thus in fact ceased to be Lutheran. Schmucker’s views on the Lord’s Supper are set forth in Samuel Simon Schmucker, *The American Lutheran Church, Historically, Doctrinally, and Practically Delineated, in Several Occasional Discourses* (Philadelphia: E. W. Miller, 1852), 120-54, and serve as good evidence of the importance of an unconditional subscription to the Lutheran Confessions.

something other than the objective gift of Christ's body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. The faith which is called for to appropriate the blessings of the Sacrament is thus missing, for the faith of those who hold such views is placed in something other than in what Christ actually gives. In response to the opinions of the Reformed of whatever sect, Luther was quite blunt:

"I reckon them all as belonging together (that is, as Sacramentarians and enthusiasts), for that is what they are who will not believe that the Lord's bread in the Supper is His true, natural body, which the godless or Judas receive orally as well as St. Peter and all the saints. Whoever, I say, will not believe this, will please let me alone and expect no fellowship from me. This is final" (SD VII.33).<sup>9</sup>

## II. Implications for practice

### A. Closed communion — theological foundations

Any discussion of the question of practicing closed or open communion must begin with a discussion of the biblical data. In 1 Cor. 11:17-34 Paul lays out both the proper doctrine and the proper practice surrounding the Sacrament, showing that the practice is determined by the doctrine. Paul warns that not everyone should receive the Sacrament, since to receive it unworthily is to receive it to one's judgment (1 Cor. 11:29). Therefore, Paul says that the Christian should "examine himself" before eating and drinking (v.28), and so eat and drink worthily. Worthiness, Paul notes, consists in "recognizing the body of the Lord," namely recognizing the Real Presence—that the body and blood of Christ are given in with and under the bread and wine for the forgiveness of sins.<sup>10</sup>

Paul exhorts the Christian to "examine himself." Preparing people to receive the Sacrament begins with proper catechesis. It is incumbent upon those who occupy the office of public ministry that the souls under their care be taught how to do so. God has set these shepherds over his people to care for them that they might come to no harm (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2-3). He aids them in self-examination, so that they

<sup>9</sup>These words are taken from Luther's "Brief Confession Concerning the Holy Sacrament" (1544), LW 38:304.

<sup>10</sup>The words "recognizing the body" (1 Cor. 11:29) have often been subjected to debate in discussions concerning the Lord's Supper. Do they refer to the presence of Christ's body with the elements or to the fellowship of the church, which is the "body of Christ," as Paul elsewhere notes in 1 Corinthians? A look at the context indicates that the reference at that point is to the body of Christ in the elements. This is apparent for several reasons: 1) Whenever Paul uses this language to refer to the Church, he always uses the full phrase "body of Christ"; 2) the reference to "discerning the body" finds its immediate context in the warning against sinning against "the body and blood of the Lord," a clear reference to the Real Presence; 3) the factionalism that Paul is addressing would be healed if the people would recognize the Real Presence. The Church as the body of Christ is strengthened and maintained because it is the true body and blood that are received in the sacrament. If they realized the significance of the meal and truly recognized the body of the Lord as given in the Supper, the body of Christ which is the church would be healed. But the words refer to the body of Christ given in the Sacrament. Luther, in "Against the Heavenly Prophets" (1525) says that the words can mean nothing else: "St. Paul means that whoever eats and drinks unworthily, fittingly deserves judgment or severe punishment, because with his unworthy eating and drinking he does not distinguish, does not discern, the body of Christ, but thinks of and treats the bread and wine of the Lord as if it were merely bread and wine, though it is the body and blood of the Lord. For if he seriously thought of it as the body of the Lord, he would not act so carelessly, as if it were ordinary bread, but would eat with fear, humility, and reverence. He ought of course have a sense of awe before the body of the Lord." LW 40:186-87. In his "Confession Concerning Christ's Supper" (1528), Luther states, "If they do not regard it [the bread] as the body of Christ, or treat it as if it were not the body of Christ, then they do not discern the body of Christ; and this offense will not go unpunished" (LW 37:347).

might worthily receive the Sacrament. At times the pastor may need to declare to an individual that for the sake of his spiritual welfare the pastor in good conscience cannot give him the Sacrament. The Confessions note that this was recognized early on, and cite John Chrysostom, who says “that the priest stands daily at the altar, inviting some to Communion and keeping others away” (AC XXIV.36). The pastor is entrusted with the public exercise of the office of the keys (Matt. 16:19, 18:18; John 20:23) and declares whose sins are forgiven and whose are retained. He therefore restricts reception of the Sacrament to those who are “truly worthy and well prepared” (SC VI.10), namely those who confess their trust in the words of Jesus.

This admonition alone, while mandating restricted access, does not itself provide a rationale for the practice of closed communion. This latter practice, while not explicitly described in the Scriptures, is implied in the interrelationship of the articles of the Lord’s Supper, the church, and the public ministry in the proclamation of the Gospel and confession of the faith. The Sacrament is a participation in the body of Christ (the real, substantial body; 1 Cor. 10:16). Through catechesis the Christian is taught to publicly confess this faith in the midst of a congregation that faithfully proclaims the Lord’s death until He comes (1 Cor. 11:26).

Modern higher critical methodology tends to reject the Real Presence and turns the focus of the Sacrament from God’s gift of Christ’s body and blood in the elements to the action of the church. The Leuenberg Concord is not the only document in existence which seeks to reunite Lutherans and Reformed. However, it serves as a paradigm for those who would introduce open communion into the church today, because it announces such a shift in focus, and it is only such a shift that makes open communion, to the extent of communion of all the baptized, possible. The shift is quite apparent in the Sacramental Practices document of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (1991), which on the one hand avoids “Real Presence” language in favour of speaking of Christ’s presence “in word and work,” and on the other hand expresses a commitment to “communion of the baptized” and “eucharistic hospitality,” making Baptism the sole criterion for reception of the Lord’s Supper.

There is no question but that the Confessions teach the necessity of at times restricting access to the sacrament, and in doing so are following the practice of the church from apostolic times onward.<sup>11</sup> Some people, indeed even some within our confessional fellowship, *must* be excluded from eating and drinking the Sacrament, not in some legalistic sense, but for the sake of their own spiritual well-being. The evil and impenitent, who need to hear the law rather than the Gospel, must be excluded. “Those who are shameless and unruly must be told to stay away, for they are not fit to receive the forgiveness of sins since they do not desire it and do not want to be good” (LC V. 58). Even those who confess Christ as their Saviour but who simply see the Sacrament as memorial or symbol must be excluded, for they do not know or refuse to believe that they are eating and drinking the true body and blood of Christ for the forgiveness of sins. “For we do not intend to admit to the sacrament and administer it to those who do not know what they seek or why they come” (LC V. 2). Such are the actions of faithful stewards of the mysteries of God (1 Cor. 4:1)! Whatever the implications of the specific situation to which St. Paul was speaking in

---

<sup>11</sup> For a detailed examination of the practice of the early church regarding closed communion, see Werner Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*, trans. Norman E. Nagel (St. Louis: Concordia, 1966). Elert shows conclusively that the church from the very beginning practiced closed communion, and confirms the universality of the practice.

1 Corinthians 11, whether or not the disunity of the congregation was being exhibited by a refusal to share what one had at the communal meal, the call to self-examination demands that some people be excluded from the Sacrament, lest they eat and drink judgment upon themselves (1 Cor. 11:29). Self-examination clearly refers to the discovery of a penitent heart, which leads one back to the cross of Christ and trust in His words.

God's intent is not to exclude people from the Sacrament, but to include them, and that can only take place when the law drives to penitence and the Gospel announces forgiveness. Reception of the Sacrament thus takes place in the context of the proclamation of law and Gospel. In receiving the Sacrament of Christ's body and blood the people of God confess their faith in Christ's promise and proclaim His death for the sins of the world. If all Christians with one voice confessed their faith in the pure Gospel, which includes the promise that Christ's body and blood are truly and substantially (i.e. according to their substance) present in the Supper, there would be no cause for division in the reception of the Lord's Supper; but since full agreement does not exist, it is necessary to take steps to assure that the unity of the faith of those communing is maintained. Ignorance of the Real Presence is to be addressed by proper catechesis, where its place in the full doctrine of the Gospel can be explicated, thereby bringing the catechumen into the fellowship. Self-willed refusal to believe Christ's words necessitates repentance, so that the Gospel can be announced and Christ's true body and blood offered to the penitent to eat and drink.

The importance of self-examination and belief in the Real Presence in themselves do not mandate closed communion, for closed communion can only be properly understood in the context of the confessing community. Lutherans note the importance of distinguishing between private faith and public confession. Faith leads to confession. Precisely because a Christian does not exist in a vacuum, but rather lives in community as a member of a congregation, the public confession of the individual is ordinarily made by congregational membership and participation and regular attendance at worship. Since the congregation is a community of faith, by its very nature its members are joined together by a common confession, saying, "This we believe." This is particularly important in the face of error, as witnessed by the Council of Nicea, which when faced with the denial of the true deity of Christ responded with a confession beginning with the words, "We believe."

Because participation in the Lord's Supper is a confession of faith, a proclamation of the Lord's death, it testifies to the unity of faith of the people gathered at the table; it does not create unity out of disunity. For people of unlike confession to commune together testifies that the differences do not really matter, when in fact faithfulness to the Gospel, to the clear words of Christ, matters very much.

The congregation is not an association of like-minded individuals who bring themselves together because of a common interest (namely, the worship of God). It is not the people who take the initiative in the formation of the congregation. Rather, the congregation is the people whom God gathers together to feed with His word. Thus it is God who sets the standards for reception of the Sacrament, not the congregation.

Werner Elert has noted that in the last two hundred years or so, beginning with Friedrich Schleiermacher, theologians influenced by the rationalism of the Enlightenment have tended to define the church as a “fellowship” (German *Gemeinschaft*), a group of like-minded people who come together into a voluntary association because of a common interest, rather than as a community or congregation (German *Gemeinde*) of people brought together by God, the term preferred by Luther (LC II.49). The modern understanding sees the nature of the church deriving from the concept of fellowship rather than the concept of fellowship deriving from the nature of the church.<sup>12</sup> With such an improper understanding, the people take the initiative in the formation of the group and set up the “rules” for membership. Were the church indeed a mere fellowship or association, the members of the church would indeed have the right to determine the criteria by which one could join and by which one could receive the Sacrament.

Because God has created the community by graciously gathering us together through the preaching of the Gospel and through the sacrament of Baptism, God also declares who worthily receives the Lord’s Supper — for it is indeed the Lord’s Supper, and not the church’s supper. The sole criterion is faith, as Luther notes in the Small Catechism; specifically faith that God forgives one’s sin, and that the forgiveness God bestows is given in the Sacrament through Christ’s body and blood given with bread and wine. The faith which is necessary to receive the benefits of the Sacrament, then, includes a recognition of the Real Presence. Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 11 show the necessity of a faith that includes the realization that one needs forgiveness, as seen in the admonition, “Let a man examine himself,” and in the Real Presence in the necessity of “recognizing the body.”

Yet, true faithfulness demands that one’s public confession be in agreement with one’s inward faith. When the pure Gospel is preached, as people grow in faith their inward belief will grow into conformity with the public confession of the congregation. Since people do not mature in faith at the same rate, and since God does not desire the “smouldering wick” to be snuffed out (Is. 42:3), pastors will need to deal with two different situations as people come to maturity. First, one’s personal faith may be at odds with one’s public confession as shown by congregational membership. There may be members in our congregations who do not accept the Real Presence, and members of other confessions that do believe it. Secondly, some who are members of congregations of a different confession, while both personally and publicly rejecting the Real Presence, may nevertheless desire to receive the Sacrament in our churches. Both situations call for responsible pastoral care.

## **B. Closed communion and pastoral care**

The practice of closed communion takes place in the context of proper pastoral care. Such care begins with a loud and clear profession of the faith of our church, so that those who do not believe in the Real Presence will come to see its truth, so that

---

<sup>12</sup> Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship*, 2. Schleiermacher’s discussion is cited from his *Glaubenslehre*, par. 2.2.

public confession and private faith are consistent with each other. In our communion announcement cards, and elsewhere, we need to continue to declare our belief in the Real Presence, and note the importance of such faith for a worthy reception of the Sacrament. It may also be helpful to state to potential communicants that when they commune at our altars they are confessing their belief in the Real Presence: "When you come to the altar of this church, this is what you are confessing."

There is no doubt that members of any given congregation are at various stages of faith development. However, whenever individuals join a congregation they are placing themselves under the rule of faith of that church, and can expect to be taught in accordance with its confession. Those who join congregations of our fellowship but whose faith in the Real Presence is weak show by their actions that they accept by faith what they find themselves unable to fully comprehend. Members of congregations outside of our fellowship have not placed themselves under either the rule of faith or the spiritual care of our church. Hence, a pastor must exercise proper care in preparing such people for receiving the Sacrament.

As we continue to proclaim the doctrine of the Real Presence we must do so as clearly as possible. It is tempting, in the face of doubts and weak faith on the part of those being instructed, to water down or explain away the presence of Christ's body and blood in the Sacrament. We dare not use phrases which speak about the body and blood being present "by faith," as though we are the ones that make them present, or replace the eating and drinking of that body and blood by the mouth with a "spiritual" eating and drinking. Such language effectively does away with the objective gift given in the Sacrament and places the efficacy of the Sacrament in our acts rather than in Christ's words. In keeping with orthodox practice, we must continue to maintain that 1) all who eat and drink of the Sacrament eat and drink the body and blood of Christ, whether or not they believe; and 2) the body and blood of Christ are received orally (SD VII.66). To bring this reality home, and as a loud and clear confession of faith in the face of the scepticism about the Real Presence, we would do well when speaking of the Sacrament to use "body and blood" language rather than "bread and wine" language, so that there will be no mistaking what we believe, teach, and confess.

Is the practice of closed communion sectarian? Quite the opposite! Could it not be instead asked if the churches which have abandoned the teaching of the Real Presence and which as a result have opened the Sacrament to anyone and everyone are in fact sectarian, for they have abandoned both orthodox teaching and practice? Pastoral care which guards the integrity of the Real Presence is necessary by apostolic mandate and is supported by our Confessions, which show themselves to be not sectarian but truly orthodox documents.

The practice of closed communion does not deny the salvation of those so excluded, nor that there are Christians in other bodies where the Gospel is preached. While we proclaim that the teaching of the Lutheran Church is none other than the teaching of the one holy catholic and apostolic church, and while we condemn the errors of those that deny that teaching, we in no way declare that we have exclusive claim to the preaching of the Gospel which creates and maintains the church.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup>Hermann Sasse put it clearly and succinctly, when he stated, "[These] two statements stand side by side: the Lutheran Church which is faithful to its Confession is the true church of Jesus Christ, and the church of Christ is not limited to the church of the Lutheran Confession." Hermann Sasse, *Here We Stand: Nature and Character of the Lutheran Faith*, trans. Theodore G. Tappert (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1938), 176.

Even as we confess the truth of the Real Presence, we need also to be careful about minimalizing the faith on the one hand and quantifying it on the other. Either act fails to recognize that faith encompasses all the articles pertaining to the Gospel, and may fail to recognize that a weak faith justifies just as surely as does a strong faith. There may be (and undoubtedly are) some in our churches who, when faced with the fact of the Real Presence, say, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief." Pastors dare not deprive these people of the Sacrament which they so greatly need to strengthen their faith. Indeed, they are the most in need of the Sacrament (SD VII.69-71).

Furthermore, even though closed communion is a matter of church order, it is not *merely* a matter of church order. Such order comes about so that the church's pastors might "prove faithful" (1 Cor. 4:2). To attempt to justify our practice, or dismiss those who question it, by simply appealing to the church's right to set its own order both trivializes an important issue and turns the Sacrament again into the church's supper, admittance to which is governed by church policy rather than by God's word. Indeed, the only justification for a policy of closed communion is one which applies the doctrine and practice mandated by the Word of God itself, as pastors do their duty as "shepherds of God's flock" (1 Peter 5:2) in the place where God has called them.

In the face of all of these concerns, however, it must always be remembered that the purpose of these practices is not to turn the pastor into a "holy gatekeeper," whose sole purpose is to determine who can and who cannot receive the Sacrament (though, as noted above, he must perform this task as well). Rather, as men called to be "dispensers of the sacraments of God" (Apol XXIV.80; cf. 1 Cor. 4:1, "stewards of the mysteries of God") pastors are to joyfully distribute that which God gives to us. That glorious task, however, does carry with it the responsibility to do so in a God-pleasing manner, as men who will be called upon on the last day to give account of their stewardship of the office entrusted to them (Heb. 13:17). This means also exercising the solemn task on occasion of excluding those who would receive the Sacrament to their judgment: the impenitent and those who by public confession do not acknowledge that what is received is that which was given and shed for the forgiveness of sins. The goal, however, is that the church teach God's people to keep everything Christ has commanded. Thus through catechesis and a bold and joyful proclamation of the Gospel we announce the good news that God gives us forgiveness in a very tangible way by giving us the very body and blood given and shed for us, that we might eat and drink of it and so know that God's forgiveness is for each and every one of us. When proper catechesis takes place, those who join our fellowship will do so knowing the marvelous gift God gives in the Sacrament, and will thus treat the Sacrament with the reverence it deserves. Continued preaching on the Lord's Supper will continue to create and sustain that reverence in the hearts of those in our fellowship so that they continue in penitence and thus in worthy reception.

### **C. Closed communion in the modern climate**

In the pluralistic, multi-cultural climate in which we live, the implementation of a biblically-based practice of closed communion may seem impractical, if not impossible. With denominational borders increasingly blurred by the abandonment of meaningful confessional subscription, with "religion á la carte" the norm, as

people pick and choose that which is right in their own eyes rather than seeking that which God has revealed, with the discovery of absolute truth no longer even considered as a possibility by many, the very foundation of a proper practice of closed communion seems to have been demolished. May we, indeed must we, abandon what is in fact orthodox practice in order to present the Gospel to people who might otherwise not hear it? Is not the cross of Jesus Christ itself offense enough, without adding the additional offense of barring people from the Sacrament? Why risk being perceived as unloving by such an act, when one can be perceived as open and loving through the practice of "Eucharistic hospitality"? What message is conveyed when we openly invite guests into our home, then feed the family in front of them, while telling them that this food is not for them? Yet, if closed communion is abandoned, how do we confess our faith in the Real Presence in the face of modern denials, and how do we continue to "proclaim the Lord's death until He comes" as we celebrate His Supper?

One might respond with a number of pragmatic reasons why closed communion should be practiced. If the Sacrament is available to all without examination and without distinction, what message is conveyed about the Sacrament? Is not the importance of the Sacrament heightened in their eyes when people are told that they must wait for a time before they are ready to receive it? If all present are invited, is not the distinction of this meal over against all earthly meals blurred?

Whatever pragmatic arguments and counter-arguments might be made, the ultimate reason for any course of action must be faithfulness to the Word of God. While the culture may set the context in which we act, it cannot dictate the course of action we must take. If the practice of closed communion is biblical, confessional, and orthodox (and it is), the question is not to be "Should we abandon it?" but "How do we practice it in this context?"

The Good News which we proclaim has a specific content, and the Real Presence as announced in the words of institution is part of that content. As Luther said, those words *are* Gospel. The practice of closed communion exists so that people might properly examine themselves in order to discern the Lord's body and blood distributed in the Supper. Proper reception, then, begins with proper catechesis. "Communicant membership" exists for the sake of pastoral care, and serves as a public profession of faith, testifying to agreement with the rule of faith of the congregation. When congregations examine their mutual teachings and determine that they are in agreement, they are assured that the members of those other congregations confess a proper discernment of the body of Christ. Thus, they gladly invite these Christians to the Lord's table and accept them by transfer.

The issue becomes most relevant when people whose confession is other than that of the Small Catechism desire to receive the Sacrament in our congregations. These people are not under our pastoral care, and may not share in our confession of the Gospel in all its articles. It is necessary, then, to make them aware of the significance of the Real Presence. Bulletin announcements and registration cards can be of great help in informing guests of what we believe, teach, and confess concerning the Sacrament, and thus what they will be confessing if they come to the Lord's Table. Those announcements, then, must clearly teach the nature of the Sacrament if they are to be of any value. They need also speak of the importance of membership in

our fellowship as the result of proper preparation for reception of the Sacrament, and invite them to discuss the issue with the pastor. If those announcements ask those outside of the fellowship to speak with the pastor or an elder before communing, the pastor or elder should be available before the service for the sake of these guests.

While as a rule only members of our fellowship should receive the Sacrament in our congregations, pastoral discretion has always been recognized, since pastors are the “stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Cor. 4:1). However, because such discretion deals with exceptions, no rule can be formulated which covers those instances. No rule may be deduced from the exceptions granted. In any case, a faith which includes trust in the words announcing the Real Presence is the mark of worthiness. Any discretion must take place in view of orthodox teaching and practice.

## **EXCURSUS:**

### **The LCC — ELCIC question**

When the question of pastoral discretion in communing other Lutherans is raised, the history of relations between LCC and the old Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada (ELCC) should be taken into account. When the doctrinal talks that led The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod and the American Lutheran Church (ALC) to declare altar and pulpit fellowship took place, both the LCC and ELCC were a part of the respective bodies. However, before the fellowship became a reality in 1967, the ELCC became an autonomous body. On the basis of the ELCC’s participation in reaching doctrinal agreement, the LCMS in 1969 established altar and pulpit fellowship with the ELCC. During the time of fellowship, congregations of the two bodies on occasion merged or formed federated parishes, and membership and clergy transfers between congregations of the different bodies took place. Though the LCMS suspended fellowship with the ALC, fellowship with the ELCC continued until it joined with the Lutheran Church in America–Canada Section to form the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC) in 1986. In this case, the fellowship was not officially ended, except for the fact that the body in question ceased to exist.

As a result of this, the congregations of LCC have a number of factors to consider as they work through the issue of inter-communion among Lutherans in Canada:

1. As a result of the Inter-Lutheran talks in the years preceding the formation of the ELCIC, it became clear to LCC participants that the doctrinal differences with the LCA–Canada Section were significant enough to keep LCC from joining in the merger. Since the merger, statements on doctrine and practice coming out of the ELCIC, particularly in the area of communion practice, indicate that

the ELCIC and LCC are growing further apart.

2. There are some individuals and congregations within the ELCIC which are concerned about those same issues. Some of these had close ties with LCC congregations in the past, and find themselves more comfortable with the LCC position.
3. Congregations which had close ties in the past may find that they are still in agreement on the substantive issues, and perceive the only changes to be administrative.
4. As the ELCIC develops closer ties with the Anglican Church, membership transfer between ELCIC and Anglican parishes will begin to take place. Thus, there will be members of Lutheran congregations who have had little or no instruction in Lutheran teaching receiving the Sacrament in those congregations. The trend may continue as talks with churches of the Reformed tradition continue, as well. Thus, the importance of the Confessional understanding of the Real Presence may be seen to be an issue of less significance for the ELCIC than it is for LCC.

Given all of these factors, it is important to act in a way that on the one hand demonstrates that LCC and the ELCIC are not in fellowship with one another, that serious doctrinal differences exist and are in fact becoming greater. On the other hand, it is important to deal evangelically with members of ELCIC congregations with whom close ties have existed in the past, and who in fact are closer theologically to LCC than to the ELCIC. Under certain circumstances a pastor of LCC may exercise his discretion and choose to commune a member of an ELCIC congregation.

Whether dealing with Lutherans outside of our fellowship or Christians of a different confession, pastoral care must certainly be exercised with those who desire to receive the Sacrament in our churches but at the same time do not want to break off their current confessional fellowship. Such people must be led to see the importance of the integrity of their confession, and of conforming their public confession to their personal faith.

Should someone come to the Lord's table whom the pastor does not recognize and who has not spoken to him beforehand, he need not pass him by. Afterwards, however, the pastor should make every effort to contact that person so that he might give him due care before he comes to the table again. If the pastor determines that that person is communing unworthily, he should have no qualms about passing him by should he appear at the table again. Two realities are held in tension: it is incumbent upon the communicant to examine himself, and the pastor is a steward who will be called to give account of his stewardship before God. In all circumstances, the pastor will remember that he is to be found faithful.

Faithfulness to God in an age of doubt and of relativism is not easy. However, faithfulness to the Gospel is necessary because it is only the Gospel which is the power of God to salvation for those who believe (Rom. 1:16). To assert the truth of the Gospel, including the truth of the Sacrament as means of grace and as the Sacrament of our Lord's true body and blood against all claims to the contrary, is a mark of integrity and of faithfulness.

The proclamation of the truth of the Gospel as truth will of necessity make the proclaimer sound arrogant, as one who has a “monopoly on the truth.” The church, however, dare not compromise that truth, but rather proclaim it all the more loudly as the Good News that it is. The problem lies not with the Scriptural teaching concerning the Real Presence, but with the corrupt human heart. Therefore, when those outside of our fellowship accuse us of arrogance in our practice of closed communion, our response must be the announcement, “This we confess,” and no other. In view of the Scriptures’ understanding of the nature of the Sacrament of the Altar and of the role of those who hold the office of public ministry, and in view of the fact that the practice of “open communion” derives its support either from the adoption of higher critical methodology as applied to the relevant texts or from an ardent desire to accommodate those with whom we disagree apart from the Scriptures’ clear statements about the necessity of belief in the Real Presence, the practice of closed communion remains the best way of remaining faithful, since it both sets clear limits in accordance with the mandates of Scripture while at the same time allowing for pastoral discretion.

## APPENDIX: Current issues in sacramental practice

### A. The Elements

On the night in which He was betrayed, Jesus gave His disciples bread and wine and declared to them that these were His body and blood. He then told them to continue the practice in remembrance of Him, namely in remembrance of His saving act, the benefits of which are offered to each and every recipient. The celebration of the Sacrament, therefore, is to take place as Christ instituted it. This means that the reality of what is taking place is to be proclaimed through the announcement of the words of institution (the Confessions are clear that the words of institution are *essential* to a proper celebration of the Sacrament: “In the administration of Communion the words of institution are to be spoken or sung distinctly and clearly before the congregation and are under no circumstances to be omitted,” SD VII.79; “For wherever we observe His institution and speak His words over the bread and cup and distribute the blessed bread and cup, Christ Himself is still active through the spoken words by the virtue of the first institution, which He wants to be repeated,” SD VII.75), and the elements used in the celebration are to be those used by Christ, namely bread and wine. Even though the meal at which the Supper was instituted was a Passover meal (Matt. 26:17-19), the church has never dictated that unleavened bread must be used. Indeed, while the Western church has traditionally used unleavened

bread, the Eastern church has used leavened bread. The content of the cup, as at the Passover, is to be of the “fruit of the vine,” that is, of the juice of the grape. The church from apostolic times onward has understood this to be fermented juice, that is, wine (either red or white). Replacement with unfermented grape juice is an innovation brought in by those who object to all consumption of alcohol, or by those whose main concern is with the symbolism of the Sacrament, and for whom the nature of the elements is irrelevant.

We dare not understand the elements to be culturally conditioned. While they certainly were used in Jewish culture and were common to that culture, it was to these very elements that Christ attached the words “do this.” “Creative” attempts at “celebration” that dispense with the words of institution or that substitute other elements remove the very words and elements that Christ used and thus turn the event from a sacramental action to a human act, and an ostentatious one at that. Such behaviour does not proclaim the Gospel, but in fact directs attention away from the Gospel offered in the Sacrament to the mere act itself. Such use also creates uncertainty in the minds of the people of God as to whether they are truly receiving the Sacrament our Lord instituted. In the face of Christ’s command and invitation, the fact that anyone would even consider doing such a thing rightly raises grave concern.

Even as we note the importance of using the proper elements in the Supper, we recognize that there are certain individuals who cannot receive one or the other of the elements because of allergies, or who cannot or will not take fermented wine. These cases call for special pastoral care.

What of those who cannot tolerate alcohol? Any accommodation to the needs of these persons must fall within the confines of catholic practice. Options for those who cannot tolerate alcohol may include intinction or communion in one kind.<sup>14</sup>

The elements and the words are the essence of the Sacrament. The means by which they are conveyed to the individual are not. Thus the use of wafers or of one loaf, the use of the common cup or of individual cups, are not of the essence of the Sacrament. While certain concerns, particularly using individual cups, have been expressed, especially in the fact that such use arose only recently (late nineteenth century) and among those who deny the Real Presence, the reverent use of individual cups neither denies the Real Presence nor renders the Sacrament uncertain. In all circumstances the elements are to be treated respectfully and any practice which makes this impossible (such as the use of disposable cups) is to be avoided. In view of apostolic practice the use of the common cup is to be encouraged. At the same time, the concerns (generally health concerns) which give rise to the desire for individual cups need to be addressed pastorally, assuring the people that the risk of the spread of disease by the common cup is negligible, and reminding them of the blessings of the Supper and the benefits that come from eating and drinking.

---

<sup>14</sup> For a defense of the use of the Sacrament in one kind for alcoholics, see E. Edward Hackmann, “Theological Principles Underlying Communion Practice with Respect to Alcoholics,” *Lutheran Theological Review* 1, no. 1 (Fall/Winter 1988-89): 19-28.

## **B. The Celebrant and Assistants**

The celebrant is to be an ordained pastor. God has instituted the office of ministry for the sake of the administration of the sacraments, and those holding the office have been called to perform that function. The Augsburg Confession makes this quite clear: "It is taught among us that nobody should publicly teach or preach or administer the sacraments in the church without a regular call" (AC XIV). Apostolic practice dictates that those called to the office have those calls ratified by the laying on of hands ("ordination") as an indication that this man has been set aside by God for this office. Churches without a pastor or without a pastor in the vicinity may have to go without the Sacrament during the times when an ordained pastor cannot be present. Though Luther noted that in an emergency any Christian can baptize, since Baptism brings one into the church, he never conceded the possibility that a layman might celebrate the Lord's Supper.

Though neither the Scriptures nor the Confessions explicitly speak to the issue of assisting ministers who may or may not be ordained, the church from at least the second century onwards has made provision for male assistants. Since the pastor is charged with administering the Sacrament, and thus charged with excluding the impenitent, good practice in the church suggests that the pastor distribute the body of Christ, while the one assisting distribute His blood.

## **Concluding comments**

As the church continues to struggle with the issues surrounding the celebration of the Lord's Supper, and as the church seeks to be faithful to God in this celebration in both confession and practice, the church can continue to rejoice at the great blessings our Lord continues to grant His people through His Supper, as He feeds His people with His own body and blood for the forgiveness of sins and strengthening of faith. In the midst of this struggle may this remain the church's resounding cry:

*SOLI DEO GLORIA!*

# COMMISSION ON THEOLOGY AND CHURCH RELATIONS

## RESPONSE AND SUMMARY

January 1999

The commission thanks all who have responded to *Closed Communion in a Divided Christendom*. Having considered the comments offered from a wide range of perspectives, we ask Synod assembled in convention to accept this document for reference and guidance. Along with the document itself, we ask Synod to receive the following clarificatory statements, which endeavor to address some of the concerns raised.

1. *Closed Communion in a Divided Christendom* is a modest restatement of the historic position of our church body, as this was formulated by Dr. C.F.W. Walther in his essay on Communion Fellowship delivered to the Missouri Synod's Western District Convention in 1870.<sup>1</sup> Readers of this essay will note that the commission has expressed itself much more mildly than did Dr. Walther.
2. The commission has some sympathy with the view, expressed by a number of respondents, that the term "closed Communion" is a forbidding, law-laden phrase. Please note that this technical term—as used, for example, by Dr. Pieper<sup>2</sup>—is part of our heritage and not an innovation introduced by the commission. It intends to convey the point that consciences bound by the Word of God as expounded in the Book of Concord may not advocate the "open Communion" of all the baptized as practiced today by, for example, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada and the Anglican Church of Canada — "closed"/*geschlossen* is the opposite of "open." We encourage a search for appropriate terminology which gets across our commitment not to practice open Communion. In this context our Australian sister Synod speaks of "Responsible Communion Practice."
3. The cornerstone consideration which rules out open Communion is the nature of the gift bestowed in Holy Communion. St. Paul's warning against the profanation of the Lord's Body and Blood (I Cor. 11:27-32) led Dr. Luther to describe the practice of open Communion as turning the Church into a pig pen.<sup>3</sup> The point Luther made with rhetorical flourish was expressed soberly by Dr. Walther in his 9<sup>th</sup> thesis on Communion Fellowship.<sup>4</sup> Since the body of Jesus is the "most holy thing",<sup>5</sup> access to the altar must according to the will of God be restricted to those who have been instructed in, and confess, the Real Presence.

<sup>1</sup>C.F.W. Walther, *Essays For the Church* two vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992) I 1857-1879:202-228.

<sup>2</sup>Franz Pieper, *Christliche Dogmatik* three vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1920) III:444: "Auch die apostolische Kirche praktizierte nicht 'open', sondern 'closed communion'."

4. Christians gathered into church bodies are not isolated, atomistic individuals, but members of distinctive communities of faith. To receive the Lord's Body and Blood at a particular altar is to join in the confession of faith made by the church body of which that local congregation forms a part. This point is made in Dr. Walther's 7<sup>th</sup> thesis on Communion Fellowship.<sup>6</sup> Giving blanket approval to intercommunion between church bodies of different confession or to the indiscriminate practice of "eucharist hospitality," would thus encourage spiritual immaturity on the part of communicants and give the mistaken impression that doctrinal differences are either unimportant or else have been resolved through the activities of the Ecumenical Movement. By refraining from communing at altars of different confession, Christians acknowledge the painful reality of Christian division, while praying for the gift of unity in the truth which can only come as a miracle of God.
5. Differences of opinion among the clergy and people of Lutheran Church–Canada on the criteria for admission to Holy Communion are reflected in most of the church bodies with which we are in fellowship. Pastors and people sometimes concur with "closed Communion" in their head, while in their heart longing for—and to some extent practicing—a less strict policy. As we agree on points #3 and #4 of this summary, we may differ as to the occasions and circumstances when exceptions are to be made in the context of responsible pastoral care.
6. Our main task with respect to the celebration and administration of the Lord's Supper is to hear and receive the teaching of the New Testament concerning the awesome gift and wonderful benefits that are ours in Holy Communion. In this process may we be edified by the witness of the Book of Concord and of the sacramental writings of Dr. Luther. We are confident that pastors and congregations with a full appreciation of the essence and benefits of the Holy Supper will receive from on high the wisdom to administer the Blessed Sacrament in accordance with

---

<sup>3</sup>"An Open Letter to Those in Frankfurt on the Main, 1533," trans. Jon D. Vieker, *Concordia Journal* 16,4 (October 1990):3-13f.  
<sup>4</sup>\*25. It is quite true that wherever the preacher administers only bread and wine for the Sacrament, he is not very concerned about to whom he gives it, what they know or believe, or what they receive. There one sow feeds with the others, and such preachers simply see themselves above such caring. They would rather have uninstructed, ecstatic saints than have the care of nurturing Christians. Rather, they want to do things in such a way that after three years every thing would be laid waste, and neither God nor Christ nor Sacrament nor Christians would remain anymore. However, because we are concerned about nurturing Christians who will still be here after we are gone, and because it is Christ's body and blood that are given out in the sacrament, we will not and cannot give such a Sacrament to anyone unless he is first examined regarding what he has learned from the Catechism and whether he intends to forsake the sins which he has again committed. For we do not want to make Christ's church into a pig pen [Matthew 7:6], letting each one come unexamined to the Sacrament as a pig to its trough. Such a church we leave to the Enthusiasts! \*26. And all of this we have received from the beginning of Christendom... The pastor is there as Christ's faithful servant, and as far as possible for him, he may never cast the Sacrament to swine or dogs [Matthew 7:6]. He is to hear the people out and how it is with them. If they deceive him and do not speak honestly, then he is exonerated. They have done the deceit upon themselves."

<sup>4</sup>"Thesis IX. In Holy Communion the body and blood of Christ is actually present, distributed and received by every communicant. Therefore it cannot, without grievous sin, be administered to those who do not confess belief in this mystery." *Essays for the Church* 1:219.

<sup>5</sup> *Against the Heavenly Prophets*, Part Two (1525), AE 40:203: "the flesh of Christ ... is the most holy of all" (German: *das allerheyligst.*)

<sup>6</sup>"Thesis VII. The main purpose of the holy sacraments is indeed to be tools and means through which the promises of grace are offered, communicated, and appropriated, as seals, testimonies, and pledges through which these promises are sealed. However, subordinate to this main purpose, they have also this purpose: to be distinctive signs of confession and bonds of fellowship in worship. Communion fellowship is therefore church fellowship." *Essays for the Church* 1:214.

points #3 and #4, on the one hand, and local circumstances of spiritual need and pastoral care, on the other.

7. To this response and summary the Commission appends Dr. Walther's "Theses on Communion Fellowship," which demonstrate that the Commission's document stands foursquare in the heritage LCC has received from the Missouri Synod. We also encourage pastors and laity to read the document of the Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations of the Lutheran Church of Australia entitled "Pastoral Guidelines Regarding Responsible Communion Practice," which is available on their website, <http://www.lca.org.au> under the documents listed from the Commission. This document gives an excellent example as to how another church with whom we have a relationship has dealt with the issue.

## Walther's theses on communion fellowship

These theses along with a detailed discussion were presented to the 15<sup>th</sup> Western District Convention of The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod beginning June 15, 1870. They are published in English translation in C. F. W. Walther, *Essays for the Church*, vol. 1, (1857-1879 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), 202-228.

1. The true visible church in an unqualified sense, or a part of the same, is the one in which the Word of God is preached purely and the holy sacraments are administered according to Christ's institution.
2. A fellowship in which the Word of God is fundamentally falsified, or in which a fundamental falsification of it is tolerated, is not a true orthodox church, but a false, heterodox church or sect.
3. Every person is obligated to stand up for the true visible church, and, given the opportunity, to join it.
4. Everyone is obligated to avoid heterodox churches, and if one belongs to one like that, he is obligated to renounce it and leave it.
5. True Christians are also found in heterodox fellowships, to which they adhere as a result of their weak understanding.
6. Those who become convinced of the partial apostasy of the church fellowship to which they belong and yet continue in it are not among the weak but are either lukewarm, whom the Lord will spit out of His mouth, or epicurean religious cynics who in their hearts ask with Pilate: "What is truth?"
7. The main purpose of the holy sacraments is indeed to be tools and means through which the promises of grace are offered, communicated, and appropriated, as seals, testimonies, and pledges through which these promises are sealed. However, subordinate to this main purpose, they have also

this purpose: to be distinctive signs of confession and bonds of fellowship in worship. Communion fellowship is therefore church fellowship.

8. Holy Communion was not instituted to make people Christians. It was instituted to strengthen the faith of those who already are true Christians. Therefore Communion should be administered to no one who has been revealed as a false Christian.
9. In Holy Communion the body and blood of Christ is actually present, distributed, and received by every communicant. Therefore it cannot, without grievous sin, be administered to those who do not confess belief in this mystery.
10. Holy Communion is also a mark of confession of the faith and doctrine of those with whom one celebrates it. Therefore the admission of members of heterodox fellowships to the celebration of Communion within the Lutheran church is in conflict with point #1, Christ's institution;
11. The commanded unity of the church in faith and corresponding confession;
12. Our love for the one to whom the Sacrament is administered;
13. Our love for our own fellow believers, especially the weak, who by this action would be given grievous offense;
14. The command not to become participants in the sins and errors of others.
15. Members of heterodox fellowships are not excommunicated by their nonadmission to the celebration of Holy Communion in fellowship with the Lutheran church, much less are they (declared to be heretics and ) condemned, but only suspended until they become reconciled with the orthodox church by leaving the false fellowship in which they stand.
16. If the heterodox themselves regard and declare it improper to commune with the orthodox, then it is so much the more disgraceful for the latter to surrender to the former their [Lord's] Supper administered according to Christ's institution.
17. The more unionism and syncretism are the sin and corruption of our time, the more the loyalty of the orthodox church now demands that the Lord's Supper not be misused as a means of external union without the internal unity of faith.



