

Regarding the Godly and Scriptural Practice of Close Communion



As a visitor or guest you may be especially interested and relieved to know that we do not seek to impose our congregational practice of Holy Communion upon you. In fact, as an expression of fellowship this observance is intended only for those who have been made familiar in advance with the essence of the Sacrament, and who have previously expressed their communicant fellowship with the WELS and our congregation. This is what is meant by the godly and Scriptural practice called “Close Communion.”

While in former years nearly all Lutheran church bodies and synods held firm to this practice, in recent decades most have abandoned it. It is with a measure of godly appreciation and forthrightness that we still retain it, and extend altar fellowship at the Lord’s Table cheerfully to the communicant members of our Wisconsin Synod and also those of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS) with whom we are presently in fellowship.

First of all, a disclaimer: we do not practice close Communion to be exclusive or judgmental. Nor is it out of a “holier than thou” attitude. Our greatest desire is that all people might be able to join us for this heavenly banquet. So please don’t think that we want to exclude you or relish it. Nothing could be further from the truth.

That being said, Scripture does have some very definite things to say about who is to be invited to the Lord’s Table. In his first letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul gives us some very specific “provisions” concerning communicants at the Lord’s Supper.

- First of all, St. Paul says, *“Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup.”* ([1 Corinthians 11:28](#)). In other words, the Lord’s Supper is only for those who realize and confess all their sins before God.
- Secondly, St. Paul writes: *“So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord.”* ([1 Corinthians 11:27](#)). What does Paul mean: “in an unworthy manner”? The Christian church has traditionally understood Paul to be writing about someone who is living in impenitence or denying some clear

word of Scripture. The Lord's Supper is only for those who accept all the teachings of Scripture, nothing more and nothing less.

- Thirdly, St. Paul writes: *"For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves."* (1 Corinthians 11:29). One specific belief of the Christian church that Paul mentions is the belief that in the Lord's Supper all communicants – whether believer or unbeliever – receive Jesus' very own body and blood. The Christian receives it for his benefit; the unbeliever receives it to his judgment. Many in the Christian church deny this central Christian truth, however. For such a person Paul has a stern warning: that he "eats and drinks judgment on himself."

Dr. Martin Luther summarized these three points in his Small Catechism, writing: *"... he is properly prepared who believe these words: 'Given' and 'poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins.' But whoever does not believe these words or doubts them is not prepared, because the words 'for you' require nothing but hearts that believe."*

Now, what if you agree with all these "provisions" set down in Scripture? What if you confess all your sins, believe that Jesus has freely forgiven all your sins, accept all the teachings of Scripture and believe that in the Lord's Supper you are truly receiving Jesus' very own body and blood? Are you welcome to commune at St. John's Lutheran Church, even if you're a member of another Christian church body? In such a case we would ask you – out of love for your fellow Christians at St. John's – to refrain from receiving the Lord's Supper until being received into membership at St. John's Church or another WELS congregation. However, this decision rests with the individual communicant. Church membership is a confession of faith. Needless to say, holding membership in one church body while communing in another is a confusing and a potentially unloving action. That's why we ask even Christians who are not members of our congregation to refrain from the Lord's Table until they have been educated about the Holy Scriptures, their Savior, our church body, and until the pastor has been educated about their beliefs. We'd be delighted to help you come to appreciate a "close" relationship with your Lord, with us, and with our congregation! May God grant that this Scriptural practice be welcomed by all who worship at St. John's!

We thank you for respecting our communion practice and the Scriptures which teach us.