### *Why Closed*

***Communion?***

**A Scriptural, Historical, & Practical Explanation**

**Zion Lutheran Church and School**

**Kearney, Nebraska**

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* Introduction

The congregations of the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod, and the pastors that serve them, have publicly pledged to practice “closed communion.” Those who do not are not following God’s Word and are going against the vows they took before God and His witnesses at their ordination. What does this term mean? “Closed communion” means that only baptized and instructed Christians (Mt 28:19-20) who are in complete agreement with one another concerning the teachings of Holy Scripture commune with one another.

In 21st century America, our guests and visitors often misunderstand this historic practice. We are aware that members from other denominations and some from our own church body, who have been taught differently about the nature and practice of Holy Communion, disagree with our communion practice. Sometimes even family members disagree over this issue (Mt 10:34-39). Some who worship with us the first time may at times feel awkward or “left out” because they are not immediately invited to receive communion with us. This is certainly not our intent.

In fact, we are delighted to worship our Triune God with you. We warmly invite all people to hear the comforting message of the Good News of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to respond with us in thanks and praise by joining in our hymns, liturgy, and prayers. We sincerely rejoice and give thanks to God for those aspects of the true Christian teaching that we agree on.

We respectfully request that you take a moment to read this brochure and learn how our practice of closed communion is, in fact, faithful to the Holy Scriptures and consistent with the historic teaching of the church. In addition, we hope this study leads you to appreciate the practical benefit of closed communion and to realize that we do this out of Christian care and concern for you, our local congregation, and the members of both of our church bodies.

* The Gift of Holy Communion

*Holy Communion is the Lord’s Supper, so we dare not treat it as if it is our own and do with it as we please.* Rather we receive this gift as the Lord has given it, allowing the Lord’s design and purpose to determine our teaching and practice.

Our Lord Jesus Christ instituted Holy Communion in order to give us His true body and blood to eat and drink for the forgiveness of our sins (Mt 26:26-29, Mk 14:22-25; Lk 22:19-24; 1 Cor 11:23-25). Here we are most united with Christ and also with one another (1 Cor. 10:17, Eph 4:3-6). Holy Communion is a privilege and holy gift purchased and won for us by our Lord’s suffering and death on the cross.

* The Need for *True* Unity

By practicing closed communion, we are not judging *your personal faith or your salvation*. Nor do we believe that the members of our church body are the only ones going to heaven. The true believers in Christ are hidden under various denominations and it will not be revealed until Christ’s return who they are.

We cannot look into a person’s heart to judge what that person believes; only God can judge the hearts of men. So we can only determine our agreement--and whether or not the Lord’s body and blood will help you--on the basis of: (1) your denomination’s public teaching, and (2) your public confession of faith and life style.

Closed communion is, simply put, a public recognition that there are real disagreements among church bodies on some of the teachings and practices of the Christian faith. That is why there are various Christian “denominations” to begin with. If we were already united in our belief about God and His teaching this would not be the case. And we will never be truly united in Christ if we act as if there are no differences.

Holy Communion is both *personal* and *public*. Any obstacles toward unity, whether personal struggle to forgive another or public disagreement over what God’s Word teaches, must first be reconciled before we can rejoice in our unity at the Lord’s altar.

The Lord’s *Teaching* (doctrine) and the Lord’s *Supper* have always been inseparably joined together (Acts 2:42; Romans 16:17). The Scriptures teach that receiving the Lord’s Supper together is a public indication that we have the same belief and teaching regarding all that our Lord teaches us through His Holy Word. So when one communes at our altar he is saying publicly by this action that he—*and the church body he belongs to*—believe, teach, and practice God’s Word in the same way we do.

We assume that everyone personally agrees with the public teachings of the particular church body of which he is a member; otherwise, why would he elect to become a member there. For it is every Christian’s duty to know and test what his or her church teaches (1 John 4:1). If you do not believe that your church’s public teaching agrees with God’s Word, you should no longer affiliate yourself with it and you are urged to find and join a church that does.

If you are not a member of any particular church, it is best that you not commune until you have studied and agreed with the public teaching of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod or one of her sister synods. The reason for this is that Holy Communion is the goal and *ultimate expression* of our oneness as members of the body of Christ. It is not the *starting point* in our relationship with each other.

This is comparable to the union between a husband and wife. It is not God pleasing, nor beneficial, for a man and a woman to *begin* a relationship with the *ultimate expression of their oneness*, sexual intercourse, and then get to know each other and reconcile their differences. Rather a wise couple will spend time together to thoroughly learn how they are alike and different from each other. If they discover that they are sufficiently compatible, then they will marry each other, publicly vowing to be united until death. All of this should take place *before* they take part in a physical *union*.

* The Need for Self-Examination

God’s Word makes it clear that we, who are sinful and unclean, need to examine ourselves prior to receiving the gift of Christ’s holy body and blood under the bread and wine. Communicants, therefore, must be able to examine themselves concerning their sin according to the Ten Commandments. They must be willing to abandon their sin to lead holy lives of prayer and service (1 John 1:8-10).

Of utmost importance is that all who eat and drink recognize that they are eating and drinking Christ’s true body and blood and believe that they are receiving it for the forgiveness of sins (1 Cor 11:27-32) so that it helps, not harms them. This recognition and belief cannot occur unless people are taught how our Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—rescues us from sin, death, and the devil. Therefore, instruction based upon the Apostles’ Creed must take place prior to communing.

* The Need for Pastoral Care

Our pastor is a “steward of the mysteries of God” (1 Cor 4:1-2). He must “give an account” of his work before the Lord (Hebrews 13:17). He is responsible that everyone be properly instructed. As a physician of souls, He is permitted to distribute the holy body and blood of our Lord only to those whom he knows have been instructed and examined in the Christian faith and who have repented and been absolved of their sins.

Rather than being “unloving” or “inhospitable,” closed communion is both loving and responsible. We do not wish that anyone eat and drink Jesus’ body and blood to his or her harm. We also respect your beliefs and do not wish you to compromise what you believe by communing with those who believe differently.

* The Constant Practice of the Church

Closed communion is nothing new. It has been the practice of the Christian church from the beginning (Romans 16:17). We believe it to be the only Scriptural way to administer faithfully the Lord’s Body and Blood.

In fact, the practice of “open communion” is an American innovation begun by those who do not believe that Christ’s body and blood are really present with the bread and wine, but teach that the bread and wine are only symbols that help us remember Jesus. So it makes sense why they do not believe that communion can actually harm someone if taken wrongly.

This false practice has spread rapidly among various denominations (especially since WWII) because our individualistic and democratic society advocate the person’s *right* to believe and do as they choose, regardless of how it might impact others. It also fits nicely with our postmodern cultural mindset, which believes that each individual defines his own truth to fit his own life style or beliefs. The Christian, however, desires to have her beliefs and life style defined and shaped by the unchangeable truth of God’s Word.

In the face of such challenges, we urge all who confess our Lord Jesus Christ to pray fervently for the unity of His church, even as our Lord prays that we all be one (John 17:22-23). Doctrinal divisions, created by those who deviate from God’s Holy Word, are not pleasing to the Lord. Neither are the teaching and practice that go against His holy Word.

All who desire to study our public teaching in light of God’s Word and, if in agreement, become communing members of our church body are invited to our instruction classes offered at various times throughout the year. If that is your desire, or you simply wish to discuss this issue to a greater extent, then please make arrangements to meet with our Pastor.

Thank you for your understanding in this matter. May the peace of our Lord be with you.

* **Bible Passages in Support of Our Communion Practice**

**Acts 2:42** - They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

**1 Corinthians 10:14-22** - Therefore, my beloved, shun the worship of idols. I speak as to sensible men; judge for yourselves what I say. The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation [communion] in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation [communion] in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. Consider the people of Israel; are not those who eat the sacrifices partners in the altar?

**1 Corinthians 11:27-32** - Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. But if we judged ourselves truly, we should not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are chastened [instructed] so that we may not be condemned along with the world.

**2 Timothy 1:13-14** - Follow the pattern of the sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus; guard the truth that has been entrusted to you by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us.

**Ephesians 4:4-6** - There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all.

**Romans 16:17** - I appeal to you, brethren, to take note of those who create divisions and difficulties, in opposition to the doctrine which you have been taught; avoid them. (See also Galatians 1:6-9; 1 Timothy 1:3-7; 6:3-5; Titus 3:10).

**Hebrews 13:17** - Obey your leaders and submit to them; for they are keeping watch over your souls, as men who will have to give account. Let them do this joyfully, and not sadly, for that would be of no advantage to you. (See also 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13)

**1 Corinthians 4:1** - This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy.

**1 John 1:8-9** - If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he [God] is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

See also pages 227-241 (especially 241) in Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, MO, 1986, and The Augsburg Confession, Article 24, “On the Mass.”

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**A Prayer for the Unity of Faith**

O God, whose infinite love restores to the right way those who err, gathers the scattered and preserves those whom you have gathered, of your tender mercy pour out on your Christian people the grace of unity that, all schisms being healed, your flock, gathered to the true Shepherd of your Church, may serve you in all faithfulness; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. [Lutheran Worship, p. 126]

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