

ALTAR & CHURCH FELLOWSHIP

THE ANCIENT & EVANGELICAL PRACTICE OF CLOSED COMMUNION



10 And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding; and the door was shut.

Matthew 25:10

7 But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.

1 John 1:7

WHAT IS THE BIBLICAL BASIS FOR CLOSED COMMUNION OR RESPONSIBLE AND UNIFIED ALTAR FELLOWSHIP?

1 Cor. 10:21-22 (ESV)

You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. [22] Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than He?

1 Cor. 4:1-2 (ESV)

This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. [2] Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy.

Hebrews 13:17 (ESV)

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

1 Cor. 11:26-30 (ESV)

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. [27] 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. [28] Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. [29] For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. [30] That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.

Romans 16:17 (ESV)

I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them.

2 John 1:7-11 (ESV)

For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist. [8] Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward. [9] Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. [10] If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, [11] for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works.

Acts 2:42 (ESV)

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.



WHY IS ALTAR FELLOWSHIP IMPORTANT?

The Lord's Supper is a sacred mystery of the Christian faith and central in the life of the Church. It is at the heart of the Divine Service. We believe, teach, and confess that the blessed bread is the very body of Christ and the blessed wine is the very blood of Christ. This fact comes about by the powerful Word of Christ, the Son of God, by virtue of His institution of this holy gift on the night on which He was betrayed into death. This gift is the last will and testament of Christ who died to atone for our sins and who rose again for our justification and eternal life in body and soul.

The fellowship of the Church in the Divine Service is holy. Given are the holy gifts of God for the holy Church of God. In the Divine Service the Lord Jesus Christ is among us as the One who serves. At the altar we express our agreement in the Apostles' doctrine (teaching) so that there is no conflict between the faith taught at the pulpit and confessed at the altar (Acts 2:42; 2 Peter 1:19-20). The forgiveness, life and salvation which Christ won by His death and resurrection is distributed in the Holy Eucharist. This gift is the bread which gives life, and yet one can also receive this sacrament to one's detriment and harm and trespass against the holy communion of Christ and His Church.

ISN'T COMMUNION JUST BETWEEN "ME AND JESUS?"

Holy Communion is foremost a fellowship between Christ and the baptized believer in Him, but it is never just "between me and God." The very name "communion" indicates a "union" or sharing of something in common with others as well as with God. The words "communion" and "fellowship" come from the same Greek word of the New Testament: *koinonia*. It indicates that in the Sacrament of the Altar, the communicants receive exactly the same thing and confess the same faith (teachings – Acts 2:42; Jude 3) which was once for all delivered to the saints. While no one else can believe for us or see into our hearts, what we are taught and confess is the same faith and creed (2 Peter 1:19-20; Romans 16:17). Decisions are not made by presumption but by the outward church fellowship and what is spoken from the mouth – we do not attempt to see into hearts. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. We cannot separate Christ from His Word.

Therefore altar fellowship is church fellowship. A person cannot be completely understood apart from his or her creed or church membership – where one normally communes and receives instruction. Despite what our individualistic culture may teach us, we are understood on both an individual and corporate context. We desire to be socially acceptable, and yet if we desire real unity, and not the mere outward appearance of unity, it can only come about through the Word of Christ which sets apart the fellowship (communion) of the Church as distinct and holy and established by a right teaching of God’s Word. Therefore agreement in the teachings of God’s Word must come before sharing in the Lord’s Supper together at the same altar.

WHAT DOES THE PASTOR HAVE TO DO WITH IT?

By reason of his call and ordination by God through the Church to the pastoral office, the pastor of the congregation is divinely charged (I Corinthians 4:1-2) to exercise a faithful stewardship of the mysteries of God in a fatherly and responsible way. He may not play favorites nor may arbitrary decisions because of social pressure, congregational politics, or what may seem popular. He is bound by God’s call and ordination vows to uphold the faithful teaching of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions. He is called to feed the flock responsibly and guard the flock from false teaching and practices through and evangelical discipline of law and gospel (the exercise of the keys). He is called to preserve the integrity of the church’s inner-congregational fellowship and its relation to the church-at-large. He does not enjoy having to say “no” or “wait” when necessary. But he is to uphold the proper path to sharing in the Lord’s Supper through Baptism and catechesis.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN IN PRACTICE?

1. Visitors and guests, especially those from other churches or denominations outside our congregation’s synodical fellowship, should speak with the pastor BEFORE coming to the altar for the Lord’s Supper. *The pastor should know in advance without surprise.*
2. Members of our congregation should not receive the Lord’s Supper at congregations outside of our congregation’s synodical fellowship.
3. Members should be ready to uphold and explain our practice without any apologies, and direct visitors to the pastor in advance.
4. When our members visit other congregations within our fellowship they should speak with that congregation’s pastor in advance.