

THE SACRAMENT OF THE ALTAR

Some Points for Consideration

I. What it is:

- a. The true body and blood of Christ in, with and under the bread and wine orally received by all who partake of it (Matt 26:26-28; Mk. 14:22-24; Lk. 22:19-20; I Cor. 10:16; I Cor. 11:23-26).
- b. It is a source of blessing and forgiveness for all who partake “worthily,” in faith (see above verses).
- c. It is a source of judgment for all who partake unworthily through unrepentance or unbelief (I Cor. 11:27-32).

II. What it is Not:

- a. Just a “Memorial Meal,” symbolic in nature, where there is only bread and wine and Jesus, if He is present, is present only “in spirit” (Reformed teaching).
- b. A “re-sacrificing” of Christ for our sins where the bread and wine are changed into Christ’s body and blood, and we obtain merit with God by partaking (Roman teaching).
- c. An “individual thing” isolated from the context of the wider community of faith.
- d. A means to achieve or express unity apart from doctrine.

III. Open vs. Close(d) Communion:

- a. “Open Communion” places few restrictions on communicants, allowing anyone who is a Christian to commune, no matter what they believe about the Sacrament.
- b. “Close(d) Communion” restricts those who may commune at a particular altar by various criteria: Beliefs about the Sacrament, denominational affiliation, congregational affiliation, ability to “examine oneself,” etc.
- c. Close(d) Communion was the standard practice in congregations of the Early Church up to the Reformation. Concerned about the sanctity of the Sacrament, the obligation of pastors to be “stewards of the mysteries of God,” and the warnings of Scripture concerning judgment for unworthy communicants, congregations were careful about who could commune. Since the Reformation, many Reformed congregations have practiced Open Communion, basing admittance on one’s sense of “piety,” or personal holiness rather than on one’s belief about the Sacrament.
- d. A shift occurred in American culture and religion during the 1960’s and 70’s, which emphasized personal, religious feelings over doctrine. Many pastors and congregations, even in denominations traditionally practicing Close(d) Communion, thought it more “loving” and “non-judgmental” to ignore doctrinal barriers restricting anyone from communing wherever they wanted. Over time, denominational loyalties diminished, and many became “religious consumers” by joining churches more for their programs and “perks” than for their doctrine and practice. It was (is) expected that churches should adjust doctrine and practice to satisfy the feelings and opinions of members and potential members. As such, congregations and pastors still practicing Close(d) Communion are viewed by

many today as judgmental and unchristian, while those who practice open communion (among other things) are viewed as tolerant and accepting.

IV. Unity vs. Disunity in the Church:

- a. “Una Sancta,” or The Holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints (aka: The Invisible Church): All true believers are one in Christ, regardless of their denominational ties. The three “Ecumenical Creeds:” The Apostles’, Nicene and Athanasian Creeds, define what essential beliefs constitute the true Christian: The Trinity, the two natures of Christ, and the Atonement. All worshippers of the Triune God who put their trust in the God-Man Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins and eternal life are Christians. They are part of “The Body of Christ” here on earth and will spend eternity together with the Lord.
- b. “The Visible Church,” is made up of those who gather around God’s Word and Sacraments in particular places, i.e. congregations and denominations. Unfortunately, there is not full unity of doctrine in the Visible Church. While true Christians generally agree on the teachings found in the Creeds, they are not unified on many other doctrines, for instance: Baptism, the Lord’s Supper; the place of faith and works in connection to salvation, the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit, the inability of natural man to choose a Savior apart from the work of the Holy Spirit, etc. As such, God’s Word makes it very clear that Christians are to strive to understand and cling to truth while avoiding error and those who teach it (Rom. 16:17). This does not mean we isolate ourselves from everyone we disagree with, but we should refrain from entering into worship or fellowship activities with others that would minimize or undermine the truth of God’s Word. Rather than ignoring the differences, we are to reach out to other Christians to “search the Scriptures” together to come to a common understanding and agreement of its teachings and an internal and external unity of the faith.

V. What This Means Regarding Our Communion Practice:

- a. On one level, Holy Communion is a “Personal Thing,” as the individual, in repentant faith partakes of the life-giving body and blood of his Savior for the forgiveness of sins. On another level, Holy Communion is a “Corporate Thing,” expressing the unity of faith and confession shared by those who commune together at a particular altar.
- b. As such, Christians communing together while holding contrary beliefs about the Sacrament are not expressing unity but, rather, undermining the unity, meaning and purpose of the Sacrament.
- c. No matter what one’s private beliefs may be, Scripture is clear that the altar one joins oneself to (and all that is connected to it) becomes his public confession (I Cor. 10:16-18; Matt. 23:16-22). Thus, when a Lutheran communes in a non-Lutheran church, his “private confession” may be of the truth, but his “public confession” is that of the church at which he communes. For example: The Roman Catholic priest and congregation will not say: “Look, there is that Lutheran communing with us, and his beliefs are such and such.” They will

say: “Look, that person is one of us. They have accepted our teaching; they have submitted to our authority.”

- d. Often, the only way to uphold truth and lead others to see it is by taking uncomfortable positions on occasion, i.e., the Church refusing to allow someone with differing beliefs to commune, or the individual refraining from communing at a church that teaches what he believes to be false. Both actions lay one open to scorn and derision, but they also can open doors to someone who inquires as to why we do what we do.

VI. In Conclusion:

- a. In faithfulness to God and His Word, and out of concern for the souls of others, congregations and pastors should allow only those to commune of whom it can be reasonably certain have been properly instructed, have true faith and share the same confession and belief about the Sacrament.
- b. Individuals should refrain from communing at churches that teach contrary to the Word of God and their conscience. It is a matter of courtesy for an individual desiring to commune at another congregation where they are unknown to the pastor to speak with him first. This way, both may be assured that nothing untoward is taking place, and avoids possible embarrassment or misunderstanding.
- c. Withholding Communion from those individuals belonging to different denominations or holding different beliefs about the Sacrament is not a judgment on their faith or character, nor is it done out of a sense of elitism (accusations to the contrary are a blatant disregard of the 8th Commandment). It is an attempt to be faithful to the Scriptures and to care for the souls of those approaching the altar. Open Communion allows neither to happen.
- d. Without compromising God’s Word, Christians should look for, and use every opportunity to work together in social and, when appropriate, religious endeavors to express the oneness in Christ we do share as His Church on earth.