

What Your Eating and Drinking At This Altar Confesses

The Rev. John T. Pless

Our Lord speaks. We listen. The stance of faith is open to receive all that the Lord gives in His Word. Of the Sacrament of the Altar, our Lord says: "Take, eat; this is my body, which is given for you. This do in remembrance of me....This is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for the forgiveness of sins. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me" (see St.Matthew 26:26-28; St.Mark 14:22-24; St.Luke 22:19-20; I Corinthians 11:23-24). Jesus' words make the Sacrament what it is. Without his words there is no Sacrament.

We may bring no contradiction of Christ and His words into this Holy Communion of His body and blood. Here we enter into the very Holy of Holies of the New Testament-Jesus' very body and blood. Here the body and blood born of the Virgin Mary, crucified under Pontius Pilate, risen from the dead, and ascended into heaven is put into our mouths. This is the most intimate union of the believer with the Lord. Eating and drinking Jesus' body and blood is a proclamation of faith. The Lord's Apostle writes "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes" (I Corinthians 11:26). It is the prayer of the same Apostle that Christians "with one mind and mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 15:6). We may not come together in the Lord's Supper with differing minds and mouths.

In keeping with our Lord's words and gifts and in conformity with the apostolic practice of the church catholic, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod practices closed communion. Out of reverence for the Lord's body and blood and out of sincere love that seeks to guard the spiritual well-being of all who would commune, we invite to the altar those who have been baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, have been taught the Lord's words, and are currently joined to an altar where Christ's words have free course, undiminished by human error or novelty.

The church has no mandate from the Lord to make things up as she goes along. Even as the Apostle Paul writes "I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you" (I Corinthians 11:23), so the church can hand on only that which she has been given. We have been given the Sacrament of our Lord's body and blood. How we are to receive and use this gift to our spiritual good, we know from the Lord's Word: "Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so eat and drink of that cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgement to himself, not discerning the Lord's body" (I Corinthians 11:27-29). In keeping with these apostolic instructions, the Large Catechism declares "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" (Tappert, The Book of Concord, p.447).

Those who are to be admitted to the Lord's Supper are first to be baptized and instructed in the way of the "all things" which our Lord gives His church (see St.Matthew 28:19-20) so that they know what it is that they receive in the Sacrament (the true body and blood of the Lord) and how they are to receive it (repentance and faith). This happens through catechesis (teaching), the fulfillment of this catechesis is celebrated in Confirmation where the catechumen pledges "to continue steadfast in this confession and Church and to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it" (Lutheran Worship, p.206). If one departs from this confession and Church, he may no longer eat and drink at this altar.

While we may not presume to judge the faith of another, the Scriptures do call us to judge between varying confessions of the faith (see Romans 16:17). In practicing closed communion, we are not entering into a judgement concerning the saving faith of individual members of other churches. We rejoice over all those who have saving faith in Jesus Christ. Fellowship at the altar is not established by faith in the heart but by sharing in a common confession of faith anchored in "the Gospel preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments administered in accordance with the divine Word"(Augsburg Confession VII,2-3; Tappert, The Book of Concord, p.32).Without agreement in "doctrine and all its articles" (Formula of Concord X,6; Tappert, The Book of Concord, p.616) there is no fellowship, no oneness in the "holy things" of Word and Sacrament.

We are painfully aware of the barriers that outwardly divide Christ's people and we pray week after week in the Divine Service "For the well-being of the Church of God, and for the unity of all." It is a cause of great sadness that all Christians are not yet united in God's Word and therefore are unable to receive Christ's body and blood together. Where there is no unity in the Word, there can be no unity in the Sacrament.

As a called and ordained servant of the Word, the pastor is the "steward of the mysteries of God" (I Corinthians 4:1-2) in the midst of the congregation. The pastor exercises this stewardship by giving out Jesus' body and blood in accordance with His words. The Lord's Supper is good medicine. It is the medicine that carries forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. Good medicine provides healing when it is taken according to the directives of the physician. If good medicine used apart from the instructions of the physician, the results can be hazardous. The same applies to the Lord's Supper. We sincerely want all people to receive the Lord's body and blood with us, but we want them to receive this potent gift in accord with the words of our Lord. As a steward of the mysteries of God, our pastor stands ready to assist you in preparing to come to the Lord's Table with us by teaching you His Word.

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