

THE BIBLICAL DOCTRINE OF FELLOWSHIP AS THE PRIMARY RATIONALE FOR THE PRACTICE OF CLOSED COMMUNION

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The classical Lutheran practice of closed Communion, still broadly maintained by the pastors and congregations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, is perhaps the single most significant cause of offense to those both within and without our church body who do not understand it. The desire to defuse potential conflict may make it tempting to mount a defense of closed Communion by appeals either to our human tradition or to concern for the wellbeing of the souls of those who commune, as for instance when we warn that those who commune without first having been instructed in the biblical teaching that the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper are in fact the true body and blood of Jesus Christ risk eating and drinking unto their own judgment, “without discerning the body” (1 Cor. 11:29). As critical as proper instruction and the spiritual wellbeing of our communicants is, concern that all communicants recognize the body and blood of Jesus under the bread and wine is not the primary rationale for the practice of closed Communion. *The primary rationale for the practice of closed Communion is the biblical doctrine of fellowship.* This paper will seek to distinguish this rationale from others; to explicate the doctrine of fellowship from clear testimonies of Holy Scripture; and to ground the practice of closed Communion clearly and firmly upon those clear biblical testimonies. The goal of this paper is that every pastor and congregation that wishes to maintain the practice of closed Communion faithfully will be equipped to give an answer, in all confidence and good conscience, to any who ask for a reason for insistence upon the practice. Those who wish to be contentious will therefore know themselves to be opposing, not a human tradition, but a clear teaching of Almighty God.

Rationales for the Practice of Closed Communion: Discipline of the Impenitent, Church Fellowship, and the Necessity for Self-Examination

For over a century, the synodical explanations of the Small Catechism published by The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod have listed four categories of potential communicants to whom admission to the Lord’s Supper is to be denied. The explanation published in 1912 lists these four categories as follows:

1. To such as are known to be ungodly and impenitent, since they would eat and drink damnation to themselves; 2. to the heterodox [1943: ‘those of a different faith’; 1986: ‘those of a different confession of faith’], since the Holy Supper is a token and testimony of the unity of faith; 3. to such as have given offense and have not yet made amends; 4. to such as are not able to examine themselves, as, for example, children [1943 adds, ‘and adults who have not been sufficiently instructed’], and persons lying in a state of unconsciousness.¹

Categories 1 and 3 concern church discipline, which is in some ways a consideration distinct from that of fellowship, though, as we shall see, discipline does relate to fellowship. Category 4 concerns the necessity of self-examination, for which thorough instruction equips the communicant. Category 2, “the heterodox,” relates directly to the topic of fellowship, and it is this with which this paper is concerned.

These categories have remained largely static through successive versions of the synodical explanation of the Small Catechism. The 1986 update to the explanation adheres mostly to the 1943 version but adds to category 1 “those who take part in non-Christian religious worship.” In support of this, the 1986 update cites 1 Cor. 10:20–21, “The sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord’s

¹ *A Short Exposition of Dr. Martin Luther’s Small Catechism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1912), 149; cf. *A Short Explanation of Dr. Martin Luther’s Small Catechism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1943), 204–205.

table and the table of demons” [NIV]. The inclusion of non-Christian religious worship, i.e., crass idolatry, under category 1, which deals with church discipline in cases of impenitence, suggests that the main reason for denying Communion to one who is engaging in crass idolatry is because of the personal impenitence this involves and the consequent fear that such an impenitent communicant would eat and drinking unto his own judgment. The passage cited from 1 Cor. 10, however, suggests that the chief concern here is not church discipline in view of impenitence, but *fellowship* with demons. For purposes of this paper, therefore, the 1986 addition of crass idolatry fits better with category 2, “the heterodox.” Furthermore, as we shall see, one need not be engaged in open, crass idolatry in order for one to be engaged in fellowship with demons.

The 2017 update to the synodical explanation of the Small Catechism is a great deal more detailed than any of its predecessors. The categories of potential communicants to be denied admission to the Lord’s Supper are somewhat altered:

- A. Those who are not Christian or who are not baptized and instructed in the Christian faith (Matthew 26:17; 28:19–20)....
- B. Those Christians who are unable to examine themselves, such as infants and very young children, people who have not received proper instruction in the Christian faith, or the unconscious....
- C. Those Christians of a different confession of faith, since the Lord’s Supper is a testimony to our unity in faith and doctrine....
- D. Those who are openly ungodly and unrepentant, living contrary to God’s Word.
- E. Those who are unforgiving, refusing to be reconciled with their neighbors.²

Category C here is the same as the earlier category 2, “the heterodox.” Significantly, it is under Category C that the 2017 explanation adds an extended note on closed Communion:

The practice of closed Communion seeks to guard those who eat and drink in the Lord’s Supper from sinning against Christ’s body and blood or receiving it to their harm. *At the same time, this practice professes that those who partake of Christ’s body and blood together are united in the same teaching and confession. We in no*

² *Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 342–344.

way mean to imply, however, that others who truly believe in Jesus as Savior from sin, yet who are not members of an orthodox Lutheran church, are not Christian.³

This note acknowledges two chief rationales for the practice of closed Communion: the fear of communicants' "receiving it to their harm," i.e., unto judgment, and concern for unity "in the same teaching and confession," i.e., fellowship. The fact that Category C is expressly stated *not* to imply that those excluded under this category are not to be considered Christian suggests that the rationale here is not church discipline (which does assume that the person being disciplined has, through stubborn impenitence, effectively ceased to be Christian), but *fellowship* with others who are genuinely Christians, i.e., believers in Jesus Christ unto salvation, but do not possess sufficient unity of teaching and confession for intercommunion.

Thus, if we sum up the witness of our catechism explanations over this past century and more, what we find more or less consistently stated is that closed Communion is explicitly practiced for the two chief purposes of preventing harm to communicants and avoiding fellowship with false doctrine. The prevention of harm to communicants is readily understood, and if this were the chief rationale given for the practice of closed Communion, it would at least have the effect of framing the practice strictly in terms of compassion and care for our neighbors. Exclusive focus on this rationale, however, has the effect of leaving the door wide open to communion fellowship with those who do not share unity of faith with the Lutheran Church but do affirm that Holy Communion is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. A Roman Catholic, an Eastern Orthodox Christian, many Anglicans and Episcopalians, some Methodists, and even individual members of Reformed and Evangelical church bodies who believe what the Scriptures teach regarding the Lord's Supper without realizing that their churches teach

³ *Small Catechism with Explanation* (2017), 343–344 (emphasis added).

differently—all would under this rationale be allowed to commune at our altars, and to the extent that they personally possess genuine saving faith in Jesus Christ, they could do so without risk of eating and drinking “unto judgment.” The Formula of Concord lists as one of the “false, erroneous, and misleading ... opinions” (FC SD VII.112) rejected under this article “the teaching that even true believers, who have and keep a right, true, living faith ... could, just as the unworthy guests, receive this Sacrament to condemnation” (FC SD VII.125). One can possess “a right, true, living faith” and yet be mistaken about articles such as that on the Lord’s Supper, or be found in a heterodox church body. As the 2017 update to the catechism Explanation makes clear, barring such communicants from the altar is not an assertion of their personal unworthiness, i.e., their unbelief. It is an acknowledgment that they are in fellowship with a foreign confession of faith, and for us to admit them into our fellowship without first bringing about a break with the previous fellowship would be for us ourselves to enter into de facto fellowship with their church bodies.

The Terms: κοινωνία, μετάληψις, μετοχή

Why, then, this overriding concern for fellowship? In order for us to understand the importance of fellowship for the practice of closed Communion, we need to understand what fellowship is. “Fellowship” is a synonym of “communion,” a direct borrowing from the Latin *communio*, which is composed of the elements “con-,” related to “cum,” “together with,” and “mu-” “to bind,” i.e., “communion” is the “binding together” of participants in some unifying factor. Communion, or fellowship, “makes common” some shared reality, common not in the sense of “usual” or “routine,” but in the sense of belonging to all, as, e.g., “common property,” that which belongs jointly to all members of a group or, not accidentally, community. *Communio*, in turn, translates the Greek word κοινωνία, from the root κοινός, “common,” i.e., κοινωνία is an expression of the quality of being common, belonging jointly to all. Similarly to the “con-” or

cum in communio, the κοιν- in κοινός derives from the component σύν-, ζύν-, “together with.” A literal translation of κοινωνία could therefore be “togetherness.” Κοινός is as opposed to ἴδιος, meaning that which is proper to one only. Thus, the core idea of fellowship, or communion, is that of participation, or sharing, in which the members of a group enter into a relationship of joint ownership: they are brought together by some unifying factor.

Nor, in biblical usage, is this fellowship simply lateral, as if members of a community relate to one another and thereby form a κοινωνία. No, κοινωνία is fellowship *in* some object in the genitive. It is only by virtue of sharing in that object that the sharers are thereby united to one another. Hence “communion in the body of Christ” renders the communicants “one body” (1 Cor. 10:16–17). The ultimate principle of unity for the Christian Church is Christ Himself: “You are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). Jesus Christ Himself presides over the communion of Christians, and the fellowship of the Christian Church belongs to Him and is under His authority and protection.

This communion, or fellowship, in the body and blood of Christ has Christ also as its head: “ἐκλήθητε εἰς κοινωνίαν τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν,” “You were called into the communion of His Son [possessive genitive, i.e., the communion that belongs to God’s Son] Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Cor. 1:9). The fellowship of Jesus Christ our Lord is delimited by the *teaching* of Jesus Christ our Lord which He entrusted to His Apostles: “Ἦσαν δὲ προσκατεροῦντες τῇ διδαχῇ τῶν ἀποστόλων καὶ τῇ κοινωνίᾳ, τῇ κλάσει τοῦ ἄρτου καὶ ταῖς προσευχαῖς,” “They were devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers” (Acts. 2:42). To depart from the Apostles’ teaching is to depart from the fellowship.

There are two terms closely related to “communion/fellowship”: “participation” (μετάληψις) and “partaking” (μετοχή). Both terms include the component μετ-, “with.” Μετάληψις, from μεταλαμβάνω, means “to get a share of, to partake in,” i.e., one takes something *together with* other partakers. This term appears in Acts 2:46, where it refers to the reception of portions from common meals shared among the apostolic community: “And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food [μετέλαμβάνον τροφῆς] with glad and generous hearts.” In Acts. 27:33–34, St. Paul urges those on his failing ship “to take some food [μεταλαβεῖν τροφῆς],” the identical expression being used twice, once in each verse. It is the whole community on the ship that is in view, and each member of the community should “partake” in the available nourishment. In 1 Tim. 4:3, St. Paul describes as devotees of the “teaching of demons” those who “forbid marriage and require abstinence from food that God created for participation with thanksgiving [εἰς μετάληψιν μετὰ εὐχαριστίας] by those who believe and know the truth.” In 2 Tim. 2:6, St. Paul refers to the dutiful laborer who, as part of a corporate endeavor, deserves a portion of the proceeds of his labor: “It is the laboring farmer who ought first to participate in the fruits [τῶν καρπῶν μεταλαμβάνειν].” The word “first” (πρῶτον) implies that there are subsequent participants as well. In each of these instances, the term μετάληψις is used for the reception of earthly food as part of a group. The term can also have a spiritual application. Heb. 6:7 says of “land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated,” that it “participates in blessing [μεταλαμβάνει εὐλογίας] from God.” The implication is that it is only fruitful believers, i.e., those whose faith shows itself genuine by its activity of love, who by that faith partake of (μεταλαμβάνει) the blessing of salvation. Thus one can partake of spiritual blessing by faith similarly to the way in which one partakes of earthly food by bodily

eating.⁴ Though the term *μετάληψις* is not otherwise widely used in the New Testament, it did become a common term for the reception of the Holy Communion in the early Church.⁵

Μετοχή, on the other hand, is a common New Testament term. It comes from *μετέχω*, “to partake of, to have a share of,” and is virtually synonymous with *μετάληψις*. Like *κοινωνία* and *μετάληψις*, *μετοχή* takes the genitive object of the thing partaken of: one participates *with* others *in* the genitive object. It is used synonymously with *κοινωνία* in 2 Cor. 6:14: “participation [*μετοχή*] between righteousness and lawlessness ... fellowship [*κοινωνία*] of light with darkness.”⁶

The Cultural Background: The Guest-Friend Relationship

The concept of *κοινωνία* does not exist in a biblical vacuum. It is represented in bronze-age antiquity by the Greek relationship of guest-friendship: when one person hosts another, particularly through the sharing of a meal, the two now share the bond of *ξενία*. This bond obligates them to extend mutual hospitality whenever it is needed. For a *ξένος* to engage in hostility with his host, and vice versa, is a gross violation of a fundamental value. Sharing a meal involves the participants in a fellowship that demands peace between them.

This guest-friend relationship is strikingly illustrated in the encounter between Glaucus and Diomedes on the battlefield before Troy, recounted in Homer’s *Iliad* 6.119–236. Glaucus is allied with the Trojans, Diomedes with the Greeks. As they meet on the battlefield, Diomedes inquires into Glaucus’s ancestry to verify that he is not a god. Glaucus reveals that he is the son of Hippolochus and grandson of the Greek hero Bellerophon (famous for slaying the Chimera

⁴ For New Testament usage of *μετάληψις*, see *TDNT* IV.10–11.

⁵ Werner Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*, trans. Norman E. Nagel (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966), 17.

⁶ For New Testament usage of *μετοχή*, see *TDNT* II.830–832.

while mounted upon the winged horse Pegasus). At this, Diomedes realizes that he has a special relationship with Glaucus, for Diomedes is the son of Tydeus and grandson of Oeneus, and Oeneus once hosted Glaucus’s grandfather Bellerophon while the latter was sojourning in Lycia. In lines 224–226, Diomedes proposes that he and Glaucus refrain from doing battle with one another in view of the guest-friend relationship they have inherited from their grandfathers: “τὸ νῦν σοὶ μὲν ἐγὼ ξεῖνος φίλος Ἄργεϊ μέσσω / εἰμί, σὺ δ’ ἐν Λυκίῃ ὅτε κεν τῶν δῆμον ἴκωμαι. / ἔγχεα δ’ ἀλλήλων ἀλεώμεθα καὶ δι’ ὀμίλου.” (“So now to thee I a beloved guest-friend in the midst of Argos / am, and thou [to me] in Lycia, whenever to the land of that people I come. / The spears, then, of one another let us avoid also among the crowd.”) Diomedes’ conscience, formed by natural law, recognizes the incongruity of doing battle to the death with one who has shared his bread in the person of their ancestors. To eat together is to form a bond of peace that is so firm as to be heritable through the generations. Glaucus and Diomedes, it might be said, had *κοινωνία* in the bread that their grandfathers broke, and that fellowship obliged them to peace with one another.

The Old Testament Background

A similar relationship of peace through fellowship is found in the Old Testament. In Psalm 41, David complains that his close friend, literally “the man of my peace,” has lifted the heel against David. What characterizes this man as a “close friend” is the fact that David thought he could trust him (“which I trusted in him”) because they had broken bread together (“he that ate my bread”): “גַּם־אֵישׁ שְׁלוֹמִי | אֶשְׁר־בָּטַחְתִּי בּוֹ | אֹכַל לֶחֶמִי הִגְדִּיל עָלַי עֵקֶב:” “Even my close friend in whom I trusted, / who ate my bread, has lifted against me his heel” (Ps. 41:9). It seems that David had been the host, and the “man of my peace” had been the guest (*ξένος*), for it is “my bread” that was eaten. This should have obliged David and his close friend to an enduring relationship of mutual peace, but in David’s illness the guest-friend takes the opportunity to

slander David as a sinner whom God has abandoned. This is such a gross violation that it is taken up in the New Testament and applied to Judas, who though he had shared Jesus' bread nevertheless lifted his heel against Him. Jesus Himself quotes Psalm 41 and applies it to Judas: "The Scripture will be fulfilled, 'He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against Me'" (John 13:18). Violation of the guest-friend relationship constitutes not just enmity, which could be excusable, but betrayal, which is not.

Since some forms of sacrifice in the Old Testament involved a meal, what applies to the peace that is established in the guest-friend relationship applies also to such sacrificial meals. To engage in the meal is to enter into guest-friendship with God, who receives His portion in the meal through that which is burned on the altar. The peace-offering (מִלֶּחֶם), referred to in some translations (e.g., NIV) as the "fellowship offering," included a portion to be eaten by the layman making the offering, thus serving as an expression of peace between God and man. Friedrich Hauck writes of this relationship,

There can be little doubt that in ancient Israel sacrifice, or the sacrificial meal, was widely regarded as sacral fellowship between God and man.... The common meal implies a close relationship which binds the participants to one another. This applies not merely to the men who partake of it; it is equally true of the believed participation of God. The public cult expresses and represents this fellowship, which involves commitment on both sides. The entry of God into sacral fellowship is herein expressed by the sprinkling of blood on the altar. Only to the serious detriment of the one responsible can the fellowship thus established be broken.⁷

Furthermore, if fellowship between God and man can be established and expressed through participation in a sacrificial meal, so too can fellowship between man and false gods. In the episode of the golden calf, it is said that the people, having rendered peace offerings, "sat down to eat and drink" (Ex. 32:6), i.e., they participated in a meal, the standard way to enter into

⁷ *TDNT* III.801–802.

a relationship of fellowship with an idol. Hosea, having vividly depicted participation in heathen sacrifices as a form of adultery against the true God of Israel, says (4:17) that “Ephraim is joined to idols” (“חֲבֹר עִצְבִּים אֲפֵרַיִם”; LXX: “μέτοχος εἰδώλων Εφραιμ,” “a partaker of/with idols is Ephraim”). Isaiah refers to the idols made by the craftsmen as “his companions,” who “shall be put to shame” (Is. 44:11, “הֲוֵן כָּל־חֲבֵרָיו יִבְשׁוּ,” “Behold, all his companions [i.e., his communicants] shall be put to shame”). To fashion idols and to engage in their sacrificial meals is to enter into a relationship of fellowship with them. The meal itself is the principle of fellowship, i.e., one has fellowship *with* idols *in* their meals, or one has fellowship *with* God *in* His meal.

The definitive episode in Israel’s history illustrating the principle of fellowship with demons in their sacrificial offerings is that of the Baal of Peor, Num. 25. “The daughters of Moab ... invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. So Israel yoked himself [וַיִּצְמַךְ] to Baal of Peor. And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel” (Num. 25:1–3). Through their participation in the meal hosted by Baal of Peor (“the people ate”), the Israelites enter into a relationship of guest-friendship with him, thus being “yoked together” with the false god. They thereby also sever the guest-friend relationship they had previously had with the LORD God of Israel, the result being “anger” in place of peace.

The New Testament Texts

The chief text for the biblical doctrine of fellowship is 1 Cor. 10:16–21, whose context is St. Paul’s admonition to the Corinthians, v. 14, that they “flee from idolatry” (φεύγετε ἀπὸ τῆς εἰδωλολατρίας). The passage reads in full:

16 Τὸ ποτηρίον τῆς εὐλογίας ὃ εὐλογοῦμεν, οὐχὶ κοινωνία ἐστὶν τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ; τὸν ἄρτον ὃν κλῶμεν, οὐχὶ κοινωνία τοῦ σώματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐστὶν; **17** ὅτι εἷς ἄρτος, ἐν σῶμα οἱ πολλοὶ ἐσμεν, οἱ γὰρ πάντες ἐκ τοῦ ἐνὸς ἄρτου μετέχομεν. **18** βλέπετε τὸν Ἰσραὴλ κατὰ σάρκα· οὐχ οἱ ἐσθίοντες τὰς θυσίας κοινωνοὶ τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου εἰσὶν; **19** Τί οὖν φημι; ὅτι εἰδωλόθυτόν τί ἐστὶν ἢ ὅτι εἰδωλόν τί ἐστὶν; **20** ἀλλ’ ὅτι ἃ θύουσιν, δαιμονίοις καὶ οὐ θεῷ θύουσιν· οὐ θέλω δὲ ὑμᾶς κοινωνοὺς τῶν δαιμονίων γίνεσθαι. **21** οὐ δύνασθε ποτήριον κυρίου

πίνειν καὶ ποτήριον δαιμονίων, οὐ δύνασθε τραπέζης κυρίου μετέχειν καὶ τραπέζης δαιμονίων.

16 The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a communion in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a communion in the body of Christ? **17** Because [there is] one bread, we many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. **18** Consider Israel according to the flesh; are not those who eat the sacrifices communicants [κοινωνοὶ] in the altar? **19** What then am I saying? That an idol-sacrifice is anything or that an idol is anything? **20** [No,] but that what they sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God; and I do not want you to become communicants with demons. **21** You are not able to drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you are not able to partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.

“The cup of blessing which we bless” is of course the chalice of the Lord’s Supper, whose wine is, in the context of the Supper, actually the blood of Jesus. That cup is thus “a communion in the blood of Christ,” i.e., the blood of Christ is the principle of unity that effects fellowship with Christ and with fellow communicants. So also with the bread: “the bread that we break” is “a communion in the body of Christ,” i.e., the bread eaten in the Lord’s Supper is actually the body of Christ, and as such it constitutes the unifying principle that effects fellowship with Christ and with fellow communicants. The Formula of Concord explains the sense thus: “The bread which we break is the distributed body of Christ, or the common [communicated] body of Christ, distributed to those who receive the broken bread” (FC SD VII.58). In other words, the bread and wine function as the “communion” of/in the body and blood of Christ because they are the means through which the body and blood of Christ are distributed and thus made common, or shared, among the people of God who communicate in them.

What St. Paul says next in v. 17 concerning unity in the “one bread” is just as applicable to the one cup. Those who commune are “one body,” and their status as “one body” is brought about through their communion in the principle of unity, the one bread, the body of Christ. Participation in the principle of unity, the one cup and the one bread, and therefore the union with the Christ whose body and blood forms this principle of unity, is primary and gives rise to

the consequent unity enjoyed by all who commune, which is secondary. As the old Communion prayer has it, “oneness with Christ” is among the chief “treasures of Thy grace imparted to me in this Sacrament.”⁸

Next, St. Paul reasons from what all should be expected to know about the fellowship-nature of ancient Israel’s sacrificial meals: those who eat of the sacrifices are communicants in the altar. That is to say, those who eat of that which has been sacrificed to God enter into a relationship of fellowship with God and with others who partake of the same meal, and indeed in any meal served from the same altar in the worship of the same God. The unity with God effected through communion in the sacrificial meal produces also a unity with other participants; the vertical relationship brings about a lateral relationship. This “communion” is not therefore a fellowship brought about by the direct relation of a man with his fellows, as in a society organized by men. Rather, the relationship with one’s fellows is brought about through mutual union with the same God in the same principle of fellowship, viz., the sacrificial meal.

This same principle applies also to heathen sacrificial meals. Those who drink the cup of demons and partake of the table of demons thereby enter into communion fellowship with the demons who play the host at these meals, which also effects a lateral fellowship with others who participate in the same meals. God will not permit Himself to be brought into fellowship with demons, so one cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons—the cup and the table of the Lord, when subject to such abuse, will break out in judgment (1 Cor. 11:29), much as the ark struck dead those who touched it without first undergoing the necessary separation from fellowship with that which was unfit for communion with God (2 Sam. 6:6–7). The Formula of Concord interprets the fellowship with demons in 1 Cor. 10:21 as the basis for the judgment in 1

⁸ *TLH* p. 119.

Cor. 11:29: “St. Paul ... deters and warns those who ate of offerings to idols and had fellowship with heathen devil-worship, and nevertheless went also to the table of the Lord and became partakers of the body and blood of Christ for judgment and condemnation to themselves” (FC SD VII.57).

From this it is evident that the judgment-concern involved in the practice of closed Communion, while genuine, ultimately arises out of the more fundamental fellowship-concern. Yes, responsible Christians do want to avoid allowing the unworthy to eat and drink the body and blood of Jesus to their own judgment and harm. This harm, however, arises precisely because those who commune unworthily are attempting, wittingly or unwittingly, to introduce into the fellowship of Christ’s altar a foreign and impure element, whether that be a wicked intention to continue in sin (impenitence), or actual preexisting and persistent communion with false teachings (heterodoxy) or outright unbelief (idolatry).

To sum up, 1 Cor. 10:16–21 requires that there be a firm break in fellowship at the Lord’s Supper between Christians and all who worship together with non-Christians. As Gregory Lockwood summarizes in his commentary on this passage, “Paul lays it down for the Christian church that there is to be no syncretism, no toying with false religions and ideologies, no limping along with two different opinions. Nor should Christians tolerate any false teaching or teachers. Rather, Christians are to turn away from anything that is not in harmony with the Gospel faithfully passed down to them (cf. 1 Cor. 11:23; 15:1–3) and shun any purveyors of false doctrine (cf. Rom. 16:17–20).”⁹ The primary concern of this passage is the exclusive purity of the altar of the living God. The judgment-concern for the wellbeing of individual communicants grows from this.

⁹ Gregory J. Lockwood, *1 Corinthians* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2000), 345.

Another foundational text for the biblical doctrine of fellowship is 2 Cor. 6:14–16, which

reads:

14 Μὴ γίνεσθε ἑτεροζυγοῦντες ἀπίστοις· τίς γὰρ μετοχὴ δικαιοσύνη καὶ ἀνομία, ἢ τίς κοινωνία φωτὶ πρὸς σκότος; **15** τίς δὲ συμφώνησις Χριστοῦ πρὸς Βελιάρ, ἢ τίς μερίς πιστῶ μετὰ ἀπίστου; **16** τίς δὲ συγκατάθεσις ναῶ θεοῦ μετὰ εἰδώλων; ἡμεῖς γὰρ ναὸς θεοῦ ἐσμὲν ζῶντος, καθὼς εἶπεν ὁ θεὸς ὅτι ἐνοικήσω ἐν αὐτοῖς καὶ ἐμπεριπατήσω καὶ ἔσομαι αὐτῶν θεός καὶ αὐτοὶ ἔσονται μου λαός. **17** διὸ ἐξέλθατε ἐκ μέσου αὐτῶν καὶ ἀφορίσθητε, λέγει κύριος, καὶ ἀκαθάρτου μὴ ἄπτεσθε· καὶ ἐγὼ εἰσδέξομαι ὑμᾶς **18** καὶ ἔσομαι ὑμῖν εἰς πατέρα καὶ ὑμεῖς ἔσεσθέ μοι εἰς υἱοὺς καὶ θυγατέρας, λέγει κύριος παντοκράτωρ. **7:1** Ταύτας οὖν ἔχοντες τὰς ἐπαγγελίας, ἀγαπητοί, καθαρῖσωμεν ἑαυτοὺς ἀπὸ παντὸς μολυσμοῦ σαρκὸς καὶ πνεύματος, ἐπιτελοῦντες ἀγιωσύνην ἐν φόβῳ θεοῦ.

14 Do not become differently yoked with unbelievers; for what participation hath righteousness and lawlessness, or what communion/fellowship hath light with darkness? **15** Or what concord hath Christ with Belial, or what portion hath a believer with an unbeliever? **16** And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God, according as God said, “I will dwell among them and will walk about among them and will be their God, and they shall be My people. **17** Therefore, come out from the midst of them and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not that which is unclean; and I will receive you **18** and will be to you a father and ye shall be to me sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.” **7:1** Having then these promises, beloved, let us purify ourselves from every pollution of flesh and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.

The Old Testament quotations in this passage are assembled by St. Paul from a range of passages. Taken together, they form an appeal to the Corinthians to be set apart, i.e., to restrict their fellowship to the exclusion of those who are devoted to idols. As the Israelites “yoked themselves” to Baal of Peor, so the Corinthians “yoke themselves” to unbelievers by participating in those sacrificial meals which unite them in fellowship with idols and with idol worshipers, who do not believe in the one true God. This St. Paul would have them strictly refrain from doing. For a Christian, who is a component part of the “temple of God,” to participate in the sacrificial meal hosted at the temple of a false God is to attempt to bring about an impossible fellowship between the temple of the Living God and the temple of demons. This principle is applied not only to explicit heathen worship, but also to “lawlessness,” “darkness,”

and “unbelief.” Thus Christians are to refrain from fellowship not only with explicit demon worshipers but also with those who by their unbelief become de facto participants with demons.

Both of these passages (1 Cor. 10:16–21 and 2 Cor. 6:14–16) assume an explicit communion with demons through actual participation in literal sacrificial meals offered in the context of heathen worship. Clearly, then, open non-Christians are to be barred from the Christian altar. Does this apply, however, to professors of Jesus Christ who include false doctrine among their teachings? False doctrine, even if taught unwittingly by one who personally believes in Jesus Christ unto salvation, constitutes the “darkness” against which 2 Cor. 6:14 warns. Consider also 1 Tim. 4:1–3, “Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.” Here, demons not only host sacrificial meals in heathen worship, they also engage in false teachings. To hear and believe, or “hold to” (προσέχοντες), “the teachings of demons” (διδασκαλίαις δαιμονίων) is to enter into a spiritual fellowship with the demons that host and promote those teachings. As the “teaching” of the Apostles is joined with their “fellowship in Acts 2:42, so the teaching of demons involves its recipient in fellowship with those same demons. The “irreverent and silly myths” (τοὺς βεβήλους καὶ γραώδεις μύθους) of 1 Tim. 4:7 are parallel to the “teachings of demons” from v. 1, and these myths St. Paul instructs Timothy to “avoid” (παραιτοῦ). Avoidance is the opposite of participation, or communion and fellowship. Paul expects Christians to avoid fellowship with demons whether in outward worship through participation in sacrificial meals, or through outward doctrine through participation in false, and therefore demonic, teaching. This is also what is in view in Rom. 16:17, “I appeal to you,

brethren, to mark [σκοπεῖν] those who make divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid [ἐκκλίνετε ἀπ', lit. "lean away from,"] them." Paul's use of the expression "ἐκκλίνετε ἀπ'" is suggestive of a meal context, in which some diners "decline" to participate with others. The promoters of false doctrine (the "divisions and offenses" are such precisely because they are deviations from St. Paul's "doctrine") are not to be dined with, which would at the very least include participation in the Lord's Supper.

In 1 Cor. 5:11, St. Paul instructs the Corinthians "not to mix up together with [συναναμίγνυσθαι] anyone if, being named a 'brother,' he is a fornicator or covetous or an idolater or a reviler or a drunkard or a robber, with such a one not even to eat [συνεσθίειν]." Through this avoidance of meals together, the Corinthians are to "purge the evil from among you" (1 Cor. 5:13). Not only does each participant purge his own sin from himself, the gathered community purges impenitent sinners from their fellowship. This they do by "not even eating" (μηδὲ συνεσθίειν) with the ostensible Christian who engages in impenitent sinful behavior. By admitting such a one to their meals, they would be engaging in a guest-friend relationship with him, and would even be attempting the impossible: to make him a guest-friend of God. Does this "eating together with" imply the Lord's Supper, or routine, common meals? Gregory Lockwood in his commentary on this passage applies it to all meals, *including* the Lord's Supper: "There can be little doubt Paul has in mind both the sharing of ordinary meals (cf. 2 Jn 10) and—a fortiori—participation in the Lord's Supper. In other words, the man is to be excommunicated."¹⁰ Even if one were to doubt that Paul refers to ordinary meals, this passage certainly applies *at the very least* to fellowship in the Lord's Supper.

¹⁰ Lockwood, *1 Corinthians*, 184.

Finally, St. Paul warns Timothy, “Lay hands on no one swiftly, nor be communicant [κοινωνεῖ] in the sins of others; keep yourself pure” (1 Tim. 5:22). For Timothy to be reckless in ordaining a candidate prematurely would be for him to put himself at risk of entering into fellowship with that candidate’s sins should the insufficient vetting and preparation result in a new pastor leading his flock astray. While pastors are of course vulnerable to all manner of personal sins, what is likely most in view here are those sins by which a pastor does most damage to his flock, viz., false teachings. If Timothy becomes a communicant with such sins through the act of premature ordination, it is no stretch to say that a congregation becomes communicant with the sins of those whom they admit to the fellowship of their altar, including sins involving adherence to false doctrine. Timothy is to “keep himself pure” through caution and due diligence, and congregations, by implication, ought to “keep themselves pure” by avoiding communion fellowship with those who persist in impenitence and in false doctrine.

Practical Implications

What, then, is the Lutheran pastor to make of all this? It is the contention of this paper that the primary rationale for the practice of closed Communion is fellowship. There is, to be sure, concern for the spiritual and bodily wellbeing of all potential communicants. Christians will not want to be responsible for the harm that befalls one who “eats and drinks judgment on himself” (1 Cor. 11:29). This judgment, however, is the result of the more fundamental concern: the misguided attempt to bring the table of the Lord into fellowship with the table of demons, whether through actual demon-worship or through the entertaining of the teachings of demons, i.e., false doctrine. One could avoid the judgment-concern by admitting one to the altar who is a regenerate Christian by saving faith in Jesus Christ, while nevertheless falling into the fellowship-concern through that communicant’s participation, even if unwitting, in the teaching of demons. A Roman Catholic communicant, e.g., may be personally worthy through faith in

Jesus Christ, even while holding in a state of felicitous inconsistency to some false teachings of the Roman Church. By receiving such a communicant, however, a Lutheran congregation publicly professes its adherence to the “teachings of demons” that characterize the communicant’s home congregation. What fellowship hath justification by faith alone with justification by works? Likewise the Calvinist who communes at the Lutheran altar: such a communicant may be a regenerate Christian through saving faith in Jesus Christ, and he may therefore commune without calling down judgment on himself—he may not “discern the body” (1 Cor. 11:29) literally as the true body of Christ under the bread, but he does “discern the body” by distinguishing the holy meal from common meals, and through the spiritual eating by faith of that which he trusts Jesus yielded up on the cross to pay for his sins. But by admitting him to communion, the Lutheran congregation has yoked itself to the teachings that this communicant publicly professes by virtue of his regular communication at his Calvinistic altar. Such a congregation is attempting to bring about fellowship between, e.g., the light of universal grace and the darkness of the Calvinistic particularistic grace. Even if their saving faith in Jesus Christ preserves them from the judgment of God, through their reckless practice they have still invited such a judgment on the community.

A conscientious Lutheran congregation will therefore guard against maintaining any communion practice that leaves open the likely possibility of fellowship with heterodox congregations. For instance, a communion policy by which the congregation admits any potential communicants who examine themselves to see whether they believe in Jesus Christ, repent of their sins, and recognize that Jesus’ body and blood are truly offered under the bread and wine, while hopefully guarding against an unworthy reception on the part of the communicant, nevertheless leaves the door open to heterodox communicants to yoke the congregation

unequally with heterodox church bodies. A Communion policy should rather require that potential communicants who are not members in good standing of an orthodox Lutheran congregation speak with the pastor before communing, and that well ahead of time. In this way the pastor can guide the potential communicant through the process of breaking fellowship with heterodox church bodies before uniting himself to the fellowship of the orthodox Lutheran altar. Thus the integrity of the Lutheran fellowship is preserved—demons are barred from the table of the Lord with their false teachings, and God’s altar is reserved to God’s truth and its adherents alone.