

# *Apologia*: Close to Whom? Celebrating the Lord's Supper as Lutherans

By Rev. Peter Nafzger

## *Introduction:*

Congregations in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod celebrate the Lord's Supper in a way that we normally call "close communion." We do so in recognition of the significance that this meal plays in the life of the church. It is in the Lord's Supper that we receive tangible and taste-able forgiveness of sins by eating the body and drinking the blood of our Savior in, with and under the consecrated bread and wine.

As we consider the practice of "close communion," it is helpful to ask ourselves a question: When we celebrate the Lord's Supper, to whom are we "close"?

The most obvious answer to this question is that we are close to God. By virtue of Jesus' promise attached to this sacrament, we receive life, forgiveness and salvation when we eat and drink in faith. Our relationship with God is restored and we are able to stand in his presence as his redeemed children once again.

Being close to God in communion, however, is only half of the truth.

The other part of the answer is that in the celebration of the Lord's Supper we are close to one another. Communion is not just an event between me and God. It is also between me and those with whom I am communing. In stark contrast to the widespread individualism that prevails in our culture, the people of God who share the Lord's Supper never do so alone. Through this study we will examine what it means to be close to one another in "close communion."

## *Scripture Connect*

The context in which we celebrate the Lord's Supper is very different from the context of the early church. We do not find specific directives from Scripture regarding communion practice at a time when, for examples, there are Methodist, Lutheran, Catholic and Reformed congregations in the same neighborhood. While he does not speak directly to our context, Paul's first letter to the Corinthians contains some very clear statements about communion practice, especially regarding those with whom we commune.

1 Corinthians 10:16-17: "Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf."

Those who commune together are part of one body, says Paul. Being "close" to one another is part of what it means to belong to a body. The problem in Corinth, however, was that the members of this body were not close; they were harmfully divided. Addressing their divisions was one of the purposes that Paul had for writing to them. From the very beginning of his letter he reprimanded them for failing to live as the "one body" into which they had been baptized (1:10-17). In chapter three he chides them for acting like children as they quarrel and bicker (3:1-9). Later on he warns them not to associate with those who refuse to live according to God's Word (5:1-13), and he rebuked them for taking their legal divisions outside of the church (6:4-8).

These divisions proved to be especially problematic when it came to their communion practice. Speaking of their celebration of the Lord's Supper, he writes, "I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good" (11:17). The first problem was that there were divisions when they came together (11:18). Their divisions disrupted their unity, and even nullified the very sacrament they were trying to celebrate (11:20-22). Paul seems to be suggesting that faithful celebration of the Lord's Supper presupposes that those who commune together are united as brothers and sisters in Christ. When a congregation is not close, things are not the way they should be. The solution did not lie in ignoring their divisions and communing together. They should be close to one another before they commune together.

One of the reasons for this need for unity is that the Lord's Supper is an act of confession. Paul writes, "For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (11:26). The "you" in this sentence is a plural pronoun – it refers to the congregation as a whole. Paul is saying that the congregation who communes together proclaims together their faith in Christ. It is a unified proclamation. Individuals at the Lord's Supper are "close" to one another in their belief and their lifestyle. If they are not close in doctrine and practice, it is impossible for them to be close at communion.

### *Doctrinal Quotation*

Since the very beginning of the church in apostolic days, Christians have understood communion as an act that reflects (rather than establishes) their closeness as brothers and sisters in Christ. Werner Elert, in a study on communion practice in the first several centuries of the church, writes, "The early church was never in doubt that unity in doctrine is a prerequisite of altar fellowship" (Eucharist and Fellowship in the First Four Centuries. St. Louis: CPH, 1966, p. 109). He continues, "Church unity is not the goal in celebrating the Sacrament together but the indispensable prerequisite...Any disunity carried into the celebration of the Communion does injury to the body of Christ" (180).

It was common practice in the early church that the Lord's Supper would be celebrated at the very end of the worship service. Those who were not members of a congregation would exit the worship service before communion began (Elert, 75-76). Non-members were welcome in worship, but they would not go to communion until they were "close" to the members of the congregation in faith and life.

Luther recognized the need to have unity prior to communion. He writes, "Christendom should remain united, should have the same faith and doctrine...And those who do not want to be of the same faith, doctrine and life... should not be tolerated in the group that has the same understanding; they would divide and split it up" (What Luther Says. St. Louis: CPH, 1959, p. 812).

This led Luther to reject fellowship with those who were not "close" to him in doctrine. About those who did not believe in the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the sacrament, for example, he wrote, "Whoever, I say, will not believe this, will please let me alone and expect no fellowship from me. This is final" (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, VII.33).

### *Application*

Many people today view the Lord's Supper in an overly sentimental way. Rather than addressing and working through differences and divisions that exist between us and other Christians, we are tempted to ignore such problems. As we have seen from First Corinthians, however, faithful celebration of the Lord's Supper cannot be done by those who are divided in faith or life. Not only are we close to God in this meal, but we are also close to one another. Understanding this provides a framework from which we may ask several questions about communion practice today.

With whom should I commune? We should commune with those who are already “close” to us, both in doctrine and practice. First and foremost, that means we should commune at our own congregation. Beyond that, it is significant that we belong to a larger body of Christians (The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod). The congregations who belong to this association have established communion fellowship because we all confess the same faith. When we worship at other LCMS congregations we can be confident that we are united in doctrine and practice, and that we are, in fact, already close to one another.

Are there ever times when I should not commune at my own congregation? There may be situations in which your relationship with a fellow member of your congregation is broken. Although he is not specifically talking about communion, Jesus affirmed the need to reconcile with one another before we worship together (Matthew 5:24). In certain cases, therefore, it may appropriate for you to refrain from communing together until the relationship has been restored. Assistance from your pastor in such cases may prove helpful.

What am I to do when I visit other Christian churches that teach things that do not agree the LCMS? In these cases it is important to avoid two pitfalls. First, we must not ignore the serious divisions that exist between various denominations. When we worship at a Baptist congregation, for example, we should be aware that they do not acknowledge the real presence of Jesus in the Lord’s Supper, and that they do not confess that baptism saves. If we commune with them, our actions proclaim that we are in complete agreement with such teachings. Paul says about those who distort the clear teachings of Scripture, however, “I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them” (Romans 16:17).

The other pitfall to avoid is to treat Christians who do not share all our beliefs as if they are not our brothers and sisters in Christ. Although Christians whose doctrine and practice deviates from Scripture are in error, we should still treat them with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15). Even when we are unable to commune with them, we are able to recognize our common faith in Jesus, and we can pray for and with them that our lack of closeness would be overcome by the unity that can only be found in the truths of Scripture.