

Questions About Communion Attendance



What are the different positions on who may attend communion?

The enumeration and definition of these positions varies. For purposes of this tract we will enumerate four positions, defined as follows:

Universal Communion—Communion is open to everyone, even non-Christians.

Open Communion—Communion is open to all those who define themselves as Christians.

Closed or “Close” Communion—Communion is open to only to those who have the same doctrine.

[Since ancient times partaking of Holy Communion in a church-body has been considered a profession that you specifically agree with the doctrines of that *particular* church-body.*]

Exclusive Communion—Communion is open only to those who are members of a particular denomination or congregation.

Which of these does the Bible teach and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod practice?

Closed or “Close” Communion.

What is wrong with Universal Communion?

Holy Communion is a Christian Sacrament, of which only baptized, believing Christians may partake (1 Corinthians 10:21). Those who eat and drink the Lord’s Supper without faith in Christ bring judgement upon themselves (1 Corinthians 11:29).

What is wrong with Open Communion?

Open Communion would work fine if everyone agreed on what makes a person a Christian. Unfortunately, many people do not understand that being a Christian means more than living a “good” life; it means personally trusting in Jesus as your Savior. Also, there are some non-Christian religions, such as the Mormons, which falsely portray themselves as being Christian denominations.

*Documented from ancient sources by Werner Elert, Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966.

What about members of other Christian denominations? Why isn't communion open to them?

Again, this would work fine if all Christian denominations agreed on doctrine as taught in the Bible. Some denominations, however, have unbiblical teachings, both with regard to Holy Communion itself and in other areas. Some examples of such unbiblical aberrations include: denial of the physical Real Presence of Christ's body and blood with the bread and wine in the Sacrament of Holy Communion (see 1 Corinthians 10:16); denial of salvation by grace, through faith, for Christ's sake, apart from works (see Ephesians 2:8-9); female clergy (see 1 Corinthians 14:34; 1 Timothy 2:12); sanctioning homosexuality and even practicing homosexuals as clergy (see Romans 1:18-28); and other rejections of the Bible as the inspired, inerrant Word of God (see John 8:31-32, 17:17). Recently, one major American denomination even voted 71% against affirming that Jesus Christ is "the Way, the Truth and the Life" (John 14:6) and the "only name by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12)!



St. Paul commands avoiding religious association with those who follow doctrines "contrary to the teaching you have learned" (Romans 16:17). On the one hand, that does *not* mean "shunning" people socially, etc. On the other hand, celebrating the Sacrament of Holy Communion together is much more than a social event; it is a sign of unity of faith among those participating (1 Corinthians 10:17). Therefore, it is misguided and misleading to invite to Holy Communion those with whom we do not have unity of faith.

What is wrong with Exclusive Communion?

Exclusive Communion absolutely limits attendance at the Lord's Supper only to members of a particular denomination or congregation. This is not taught in the Bible.

But isn't that exactly the position of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod?

No; the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod does not now practice, nor has it ever practiced, Exclusive Communion. Rather, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod follows the Biblical teaching of Closed or "Close" Communion.

What is the difference between Closed or "Close" Communion and Exclusive Communion?

Unlike Exclusive Communion, Closed or "Close" Communion does not make membership in a particular denomination the only determining factor in deciding who may partake of Holy Communion. Instead, the pastor personally counsels with guests individually.

So why does the bulletin state that members of other congregations of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod may partake of Holy Communion? Isn't this Exclusive Communion?

No; it is simply a matter of expediency. Since all congregations in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod must pledge themselves to certain doctrinal standards, we assume that members of other congregations of the Synod agree with the doctrinal position of our own congregation. But the reason they are welcome to partake of Holy Communion is not their membership itself, but rather the beliefs we assume that membership indicates.

Aren't you really saying that anyone who isn't a Missouri Synod Lutheran isn't a true Christian?

Absolutely not! Only God can judge whether or not a person has faith in his heart. But we can only go by what people themselves say they believe, and if that is not in agreement with the Bible, we cannot have religious fellowship with them (Romans 16:17). Yet even then, we are in no way saying that they are not Christians. In fact, the exact opposite is true. In any denomination where the Word of God is used there must be true Christian believers, because God's word has the power to turn hearts to Christ and bring people to faith in him (Isaiah 55:10-11; Romans 1:16).

What about the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America?

Unfortunately, there have been radical changes lately in the ELCA, relating to the doctrine of Holy Communion. Predecessor bodies to the present day ELCA adopted the "Galesburg Rule," named after the city of Galesburg, Illinois, where it was formulated in 1875. This was a longstanding mutual agreement among Lutheran Church bodies in America, which simply stated, "Lutheran altars for Lutheran communicants only."

However, the ELCA recently adopted inter-communion with the United Methodist Church. This followed similar agreements with the Reformed Church in America, the United Church of Christ, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and the Moravian Church. These all belong to a group of church bodies known as the Reformed. An important distinction between Lutherans and the Reformed is that Reformed doctrine specifically rejects the Lutheran teaching, based on Scripture, of the physical Real Presence of Christ's body and blood, in, with, and under the bread and wine in Holy Communion.

This fundamental disagreement about Holy Communion goes back to a meeting in 1529 between Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli, leader of the Reformed. Zwingli insisted that the bread and wine only symbolize Christ's body and blood, and rejected the physical Real Presence of Christ in the Sacrament, because it does not make sense according to human reason.

Characteristic of Luther, who stood before the world and proclaimed, "Unless I am convinced by Scripture . . . my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot, I shall not, I will not recant . . . Here I stand, I can do no other!" he dramatically pulled back the tablecloth and with chalk wrote on the table, in Latin, "This IS My body; this IS My blood." Luther declared that he and his followers would never compromise on this doctrine, because Christ clearly teaches the physical Real Presence of His body and blood in the Sacrament. This was also the basis for the Galesburg Rule.

Later, when Germany had Reformed rulers, Lutherans were actually persecuted and pastors imprisoned for refusing to compromise on the old Lutheran teaching of the Real Presence. This was why the founders of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod immigrated to the United States, to escape persecution and find religious freedom here to cling with Luther to the teaching of Christ, "This IS My body; this IS My blood."

Additional issues are raised by the ELCA inter-communion agreement with the Episcopal Church, which states that Lutheran pastors and the Holy Communion they administer are not fully valid until they are reordained under succession from an Episcopal bishop. This is directly contrary to the teachings of Luther and the Lutheran Church, and an affront to Lutheran clergy both past and present.

On the other hand, clergy from churches which deny the physical Real Presence of Christ in Holy Communion can even serve as pastors of ELCA congregations, and conduct services of Holy Communion!

All this certainly calls into question the fundamental doctrine of Holy Communion. It is unfortunate that the ELCA has put its members into this situation by diverging both from their own history and Lutheran doctrine and practice going back to Martin Luther himself.

What should I do if I am not a member of this congregation or another congregation of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, but I would like to receive Holy Communion here?

Please make arrangements to visit personally with the pastor before partaking of communion here.

Rev. Kevin Vogts, Holy Cross Lutheran Church, Dakota Dunes, South Dakota