

Some people think we are snobs, religious snobs. Some feel hurt and rejected; some get angry. They compare what we say with what other churches say and decide we have a bunch of silly, old church rules, and they aren't going to put up with them or us. What's the sticking point? Close Communion - the teaching that we invite to the Lord's Supper only repentant Christians who share the same faith with us. But if close communion causes so much trouble, **Why Do We Practice Close Communion?**

Simple answer. Because close communion is what the Bible teaches. We don't decide what to teach based on what other churches teach or what we think people want to hear. And we don't abandon God's teaching just because it may be unpopular. We are here to teach what God says.

So what does God say? In our lesson Paul tells us what Jesus taught him. We see: 1. The Lord's Supper offers a great blessing. 2. The Lord's Supper comes with a great warning. and 3. When we receive the Lord's Supper we are making a statement about what we believe; we are confessing a common faith.

So why do we practice close communion? Close communion is a sign of the great respect we have for the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper is not just a bite of bread and a gulp of wine and off we go. In his Supper Jesus is offering us a great blessing that demands special attention. To show us that, Paul takes us back to the first Lord's Supper on Maundy Thursday.

There Jesus knew he was about to be arrested, put on trial, and killed. His disciples would feel left alone. Jesus knew he would raise himself back to life on Easter, but he also knew he would soon be returning to heaven. Jesus' disciples would no longer see him walking beside them; his church would no longer hear his word direct from his mouth. Jesus knew his disciples and his church would sometimes feel alone, forgotten, left behind.

So Jesus invited his church to dinner. Not just a one-time invitation, but an invitation to supper with Jesus again and again and again. Not just a pot-luck meal that we prepare, but a meal prepared by Jesus. Paul tells us, "**The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'this is my body, which is for you in the same way, after supper he took the cup saying, this cup is the new covenant in my blood.'**" There we see how special the Lord's Supper is. In the Lord's Supper, in the bread and wine, Jesus gives us his own body and blood as his proof that he is with us.

Why his body and blood? It doesn't sound possible; it even sounds kind of sick. But with his body and blood in the bread and wine, Jesus is teaching us the most important thing he did. Jesus gave his body for us; he shed his blood for us. Our bodies were born full of sin; our blood is the price that God demands as payment for sin. Body and blood, body and soul, inside and out we were under God's curse. We had sinned against him and by his law we deserved to die. But God doesn't want our death; it doesn't make God's day to see sinners stew in hell.

So God put his Son Jesus in our place. In place of our bodies, Jesus gave his body. In place of our blood, Jesus gave his blood. By taking our place Jesus bought our forgiveness. Every time we have the Lord's Supper we are reminded of the sacrifice Jesus made for us. Every time, we are reminded of the forgiveness Jesus bought for us. And in the Lord's Supper we are given that forgiveness - our sins are taken away and God gives us his peace.

What a great blessing! Here you have: the body and blood of Jesus himself, God's proof and promise of forgiveness, given for you!

Some people might say, "If the Lord's Supper is such a great blessing, why not open communion and invite everyone to the Supper? Don't you want everyone to have that blessing?" And our answer is yes; God's wants everyone and we want everyone to be able to share in God's blessing and forgiveness. But that doesn't mean that the Lord's Supper is meant to be an open meal for anyone and everyone any time and all times.

When Jesus wanted his preaching to be shared, he said, "**go into all the world and preach the good news to every creature.**" When Jesus wanted his baptism to be shared, he said, "**go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them.**" But when Jesus wanted to share his love and forgiveness in the Lord's Supper, he didn't say, "**go out into all the world;**" instead Jesus gathered his church - yes, his insiders - together for that special blessing.

Why did Jesus do things that way? Jesus doesn't tell us, but through Paul he does show us - with the great blessing of the Lord's Supper comes a great warning.

Paul says, "**Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. Anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep.**"

The great blessing comes with a great warning. At the time of our lesson some of the Corinthians were going to the Lord's Supper with their hearts full of sin, not really caring what they were doing, treating the Lord's Supper as nothing special, just as if the body and blood of Christ were not there. So Paul warned them and he warns us. If we go to the Lord's Supper without recognizing that the body and blood of Christ are there in the bread and wine, we are rejecting Jesus' words, and we would be eating and drinking unworthily. If we go to the Lord's Supper holding on to our sin, we are abusing the forgiving purpose of the Lord's Supper, and we would be eating and drinking unworthily. And that would mean judgment.

We don't want to invite people to judgment, so before we invite people to the Supper we instruct them what the Lord's Supper is, and we show them that the Supper is for repentant sinners, that is, for sinners looking for forgiveness, looking to be free of their sin. We do not want to invite people to judgment, that is why I might say, "You aren't ready for the Supper," or "can we talk before you go to the Supper?" Some people have a problem with that; they say that Jesus gave the Lord's Supper to the church, not to some pastor. And that is right. But if we see someone heading towards judgment, what does Jesus call us to do? Invite them into the fire?

That's not love, is it?

Love is what this warning is about. God isn't warning us because he wants to judge us, but because he wants to save us from judgment. And we share God's warning, not because we want to judge people, but to save them from judgment. That's why we teach close communion.

There is another reason we teach close communion. And that is when we receive the Lord's Supper we are making a statement about what we believe; we are confessing a common faith.

Paul says, **“Is not the cup a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread 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.”** Paul is talking about togetherness. In the Lord's Supper bread and body are together, wine and blood are together. And when we go to the Lord's Supper together we are saying that we are together as one body, together in one faith and one teaching.

The togetherness of the bread and body, wine and blood, is not a pretend togetherness, it is real. And so when we get together at the Lord's table, it is not to be a pretend togetherness, where we believe and teach different, but pretend we are together. That is not the togetherness of the Lord's Supper; that is lying. We gather together at the Lord's Table only with those who share our faith and teaching. If we don't agree with what a congregation teaches, we don't share in their Lord's Supper. If we don't know what a congregation teaches, we don't pretend we agree, but we wait until we know. And when people come to us, we don't invite them to the Supper until they know what we teach, and they confess that we are together in faith and teaching. Anything less would only be pretend and a lie.

Does Paul tell us these things to turn people away from the Lord's Supper? No, Paul wants to turn people away from pretending and lying, and to turn people away from sin and judgment. He wants us to know how special the Supper is. And so do we. That's why we teach close communion. Amen.