

Open or Closed Communion?

By Paul O. Nichols

The Catholic Church, the Lutheran Church of the Missouri Synod, and some other religious sects believe and practice “closed communion.” And now we have members of the Church of Christ who are also advocating this practice. To some, the term “open communion” means open to anyone, saint or sinner; anyone who wants to partake is welcome to do so. The term “closed communion” means to some, that it is only open to the ones they judge worthy, and they have the authority to make that determination.

Neither position is right.

The fact is, the Lord’s Supper belongs to the Lord, and only He has the authority to either open it or close it. No one has been delegated such authority. We have been given the example and all the instructions we need to observe it in a way that pleases

Him. These instructions apply to all alike. Jesus is our King, and if we are given an invitation to the King’s table, it is His doing, and we are His guests, invited to eat and drink with Him and with one another. If we eat and drink without His invitation or in a way which displeases Him, it is He who will deal with us; not the other guests. They have no such control. It is the “Lord’s table.” (1 Cor. 10:21).

Only Christians are supposed to partake of the communion, that is, only those who have “obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine” (Rom. 6:17). When a person is baptized, no one but the Lord knows whether he does it from the heart. And if he does not, the Lord makes no mistake by adding him the church. That person has only gone down into the water **a dry sinner** and come up a **wet sinner**. **He is not a Christian**. Therefore, he has no right to eat at the Lord’s table. “Man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart” (2 Sam. 16:7). Only God knows if the person is sincere or not. I am not responsible for that man who partakes without the Lord’s approval, **nor is any other Christian**.

If a member who is not living a Christian life, partakes of the Lord’s supper without God’s approval, no one but that

person is responsible. Other Christians will not be condemned for his sin. **He communes it to his own damnation.**

The word of God teaches that we must worship God “in spirit and in truth” (John 4:23,24). To worship the Lord in spirit means to be sincere of heart and spiritually minded. One cannot simply go through a form or ritual, and call it worship. This has to do with the “inner man.” To worship God “in truth” is to worship the Lord according to what He has specified in His word. The apostle Paul wrote to the Christians at Philippi. “For we are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh” (Phil. 3:3). Ours is a spiritual service, done according to God’s directions. Each worshiper is responsible for his own attitude in his service to God. If he does not worship in spirit, his worship is in vain. But no one else is condemned for his wrong. In the instructions for the proper observance of the Lord’s Supper the apostle Paul taught the Christians at Corinth that each person was to scrutinize himself.

The communion service is a congregational duty (1 Cor. 11:18, 33). We do it in memory of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. By communing we show the

death of Christ because we believe He is coming again (1 Cor. 11:26). It is a congregational observance, yet each communicant is told to **“examine himself”** before participating. Paul warns that if one eats and drinks **“not discerning the Lord’s body”** that he does so **“unworthily”** and in so doing **he condemns himself**. Because of the failure to commune in a proper way, many of the Corinthians were spiritually weak, some were sick and others were already dead as far as salvation was concerned (1 Cor. 11:28-30).

Some misunderstand and misapply what the apostle teaches in first Corinthians chapter five. No where in this chapter is Paul teaching about the Communion in particular. He is giving instructions about fellowship and personal association in general. The terms “not to company” (v9) and “not to keep company” (v11) and “with such one no not to eat” all have reference to the same thing. Associating and socializing with unruly and sinful members of the church (and the writer specifies those sins) may suggest to them that they are acceptable in their sinful state. A person has control over his own table and can invite and can refuse to invite whomsoever he will. But **what person in a congregation is authorized to examine others** who partake of the Lord’s Supper?

The only person anyone has any control over in this matter is himself. He can refuse to eat with one he thinks is unworthy, but in so doing he deprives himself. If an individual unscripturally partakes of the Communion, he alone is accountable to the Lord. No one in a congregation has the authority to control another persons partaking, “Who art thou that judgest another man’s servant? To his own master he standeth or falleth” (Rom. 14:4). “So then everyone of us shall give account of himself to God. Let us not therefore judge one another anymore...” (Rom. 14:12, 13). “But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread and drink of that cup” (1 Cor. 11:28).

The Lord’s Supper is a serious and sacred matter, and everyone should be properly instructed before the observance. All need to understand who and who is not eligible and scripturally qualified to sit at the King’s table to commune with Him and His faithful servants who are citizens in His kingdom. Concerning this matter the apostle says, “For if we would ourselves, we should not be judged” (1 Cor. 11:31). Amen.

Paul O. Nichols has served the Church of Christ faithfully for over sixty years.

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