

## The Unity of the Lord's Teaching and Closed Communion

**But I fear, lest by any means,  
as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtlety,  
so your minds should be corrupted from  
the simplicity that is in Christ.**

[2 Corinthians 11:3]

### *A Crazy Idea: Unity of Doctrine*

“Unity of doctrine?” people ask with an astonished look on their face. “Do you really think that the church has unity of doctrine?” One of the marks of our modern age is that each person holds an individual belief. A recent survey of religious convictions showed that most churchgoers were not that convinced about their convictions. The Pew Forum survey says:

A major survey by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life finds that most Americans have a non-dogmatic approach to faith. A majority of those who are affiliated with a religion, for instance, do not believe their religion is the only way to salvation. And almost the same number believes that there is more than one true way to interpret the teachings of their religion. This openness to a range of religious viewpoints is in line with the great diversity of religious affiliation, belief and practice that exists in the United States, as documented in a survey of more than 35,000 Americans that comprehensively examines the country's religious landscape. (<http://religions.pewforum.org/pdf/report2religious-landscape-study-key-findings.pdf>)

There is a disconnect between what an individual confesses and what their church confesses. How many Southern Baptists believe everything their church teaches? How many Roman Catholics believe all the things the pope believes? For that matter, how many Lutherans hold to the teaching of the Small Catechism and the Lutheran Confessions?

And more, not only is there a disconnect between the individual belief and the church's confession, but many people don't *know* what their church teaches. *And* many people don't even *care* what their church believes. A church's teaching is often understood as “man's opinion”, and, after all, “my opinion is just as good as yours.”

In this the confession of faith is reduced to opinion, making tolerance the order of the day. After all, putting my opinion over your opinion is arrogant. But this is not about opinions. In the church we are to cast aside our opinions; the Lord's Word is all that has sway.

Anyhow, all this long introduction is to get to this: when we Lutherans say there should be unity of doctrine in the Lord's church we sound, to the world, like we are crazy. “The church rejoices in doctrinal unity” sounds about the same as “My unicorn prefers baby carrots.”

Because the teaching of closed communion is built upon the assumption that there is unity of

doctrine, our practice of closed communion seems equally nutty. Closed communion is a difficult teaching because there is hardly a person who believes that the church can or should have a unity of doctrine. To establish our teaching of closed communion we have to first establish the Scripture's teaching that the church can, should and even must have a unity of teaching.

#### *Unity of Doctrine in the Lord's Church*

Back, then, to the original question: "Do you really think that the church has unity of doctrine?" Let's take that question to the Scriptures.

Over and over in the Bible the church is commanded to be of "one mind."

**1 Corinthians 1:10** I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be *no divisions* among you, but that you be *united in the same mind* and the same judgment.

This "one mind" is a unity of faith and love.

**Philippians 2:1-4** So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, <sup>2</sup> complete my joy by *being of the same mind*, having the same love, being in full accord and of *one mind*. <sup>3</sup> Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. <sup>4</sup> Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

**1 Peter 3:8** Finally, all of you, have *unity of mind*, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind.

Jesus prays for us, His church, that we would be one. This unity is manifest in the Lord's Word.

**John 17:11,17** [Jesus prays,] "And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be *one*, even as we are one. ... <sup>17</sup> Sanctify them in the truth; your *word is truth*."

This unity is agreement in doctrine, in teaching, in the Lord's Word. It is "the faith" of which Jude speaks.

**Jude 1:3** Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for *the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints*.

St Paul gives the same instruction to St Timothy, who, as a young pastor, was to be very careful with His teaching and doctrine, not to stray from the sound word and teaching of the Scriptures.

**1 Timothy 4:6** If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in *the words of the faith and of the good doctrine* that you have followed.

**1 Timothy 4:16** Keep a close watch on yourself and on the *teaching*. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.

**2 Timothy 1:13** Follow the *pattern of the sound words* that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

Timothy is to stick to the Lord's Word because it is the Word of salvation. This is why the Lord constantly warns us about false prophets who would bring a different teaching into the church.

**Jeremiah 23:16** Thus says the LORD of hosts: "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD.

When the Scriptures use the word "Beware", they are most often warning us to beware of false teachers.

**Matthew 7:15** [Jesus says,] "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves."

**Matthew 16:6,12** Jesus said to them, "Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." ... <sup>12</sup> Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

**Philippians 3:2** Look out for [Beware of] the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh.

**Colossians 2:8** See to it [Beware] that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.

**2 Peter 3:17** You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care [Beware] that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability.

False teachers are dangerous because they bring false teaching. False teaching is dangerous because it draws us away from Jesus; it pulls us away from the Gospel of our salvation. St Paul has the harshest words for those who would turn us away from the Lord's Gospel with false teaching.

**Galatians 1:6-9** I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel-- <sup>7</sup> not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. <sup>8</sup> But even if

we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. <sup>9</sup> As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.

Never is St Paul more forceful, never more severe. He knows the danger of false teaching, the sound of the devil's lies, the taste of his poison. The true Gospel brings Jesus with the forgiveness of sins, life and eternal salvation; false teaching brings death and hell.

The church that has lost this understanding and no longer cares for the truth and clarity of the Gospel, the church that has lost this zeal for the truth and this unity of doctrine is a church that has lost her love for Christ and the salvation of mans souls. Concern for the unity of doctrine is concern for the Lord's saving Word, and it is concern for all sinners who have life only in that word.

### *Divisions*

False teaching breaks fellowship. False teaching causes divisions.

We are so worried about the church dividing, splitting, that we are willing to endure error in the church to keep things together. But this is a sham unity; a false fellowship. The one-mind of the church has already been broken.

**1 Corinthians 1:10-17** I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. <sup>11</sup> For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. <sup>12</sup> What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ." <sup>13</sup> Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? <sup>14</sup> I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, <sup>15</sup> so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name. <sup>16</sup> (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) <sup>17</sup> For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

What would the Lord have us do with those who cause divisions? St Paul answers the question:

**Romans 16:17-18** I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. <sup>18</sup> For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive.

This text is very important. False teaching causes divisions. The Lord's church is to watch out for those who would cause divisions and avoid them. "Watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them." This teaching is clear.

If a church is so sick that false teaching does not cause division, but that truth and falsehood live together under the same roof, then something is very wrong. As long as the liver is working the body can filter out toxins and poisons, but if the liver shuts down the toxins build up and the body dies. So it is with false teaching in the church. The devil will always breath the putrid air of his damning false doctrine into the church. The danger comes when this teaching is not exposed and rejected.

This is the purpose for which the Lord uses false doctrine.

**1 Corinthians 11:19** ...for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized.

The Lord would have the truth of His Word and the simplicity of Christ to be recognized and manifest.

If we've gotten this far together, we are not far from understanding the ancient practice of "closed communion."

#### *Unity of Teaching and the Lord's Supper*

This unity of teaching is commanded, expected, and, praise God, given. It is the mind of Christ, that is, the teaching of the Gospel.

**1 Corinthians 2:16** "For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ.

**Philippians 2:5** Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.

Far from being the achievement of men, an accomplishment that we achieve, the unity of faith is the gift of God. Far from a cause for pride, unity of doctrine comes to the humble faith which simply receives the Lord's Word.

This unity of teaching is the "fellowship" which the Spirit gives to the "one, holy, Christian and apostolic church."

**Acts 2:42** And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and *fellowship*, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

But what does this unity of doctrine have to do with the Lord's Supper? We begin to see the answer in the text above from Acts 2. The apostle's teaching and fellowship and the breaking of bread [the Lord's Supper] are all together. The teachings is the Lord's and the altar is the Lord's as well. If we don't have unity in the apostle's teaching then we do not have the fellowship of the breaking of the bread.

If we are to avoid those who bring division contrary to the teaching [*Romans 16:17*], how can we

also come to the Lord's table with the?

St. Paul makes this very clear in his first epistle to the Corinthians.

**1 Corinthians 11:16-20** If anyone is inclined to be contentious, we have no such practice, nor do the churches of God. <sup>17</sup> But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. <sup>18</sup> For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, <sup>19</sup> for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. <sup>20</sup> When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat.

There were divisions in the church, factions, false teaching along side the true, and because of this their eating together was “not the Lord's supper.” Communion without common teaching is not communion. False teaching destroys the confession to which the Lord's Super testifies. Unity of teaching and unity in communing go together. We confess together with our lips before we eat and drink, and if we cannot make a common confession then we dare not share a common meal in the Lord's name.

Every thing good comes from God. This is especially true of the unity of doctrine that the Lord gives to His church. We give Him thanks that He has brought us into fellowship with Himself, His Son and the Holy Spirit, through the Gospel, and we pray that He would keep us in the same until we reach the new heaven and the new earth where no false teaching will threaten to divide us from Him. Amen.

**INJ,**  
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