

Fellowship and the Sacrament

Precisely because of the importance of Christ's Word in the Sacrament, the AELC has consistently practiced what is called close(d) Communion. That is, we offer the Sacrament to and receive it only with those who have the same confession of faith. For the Sacrament is indeed a "communion," a communion with Christ and also with one another. We do not want to encourage the false doctrine of those who hold to false doctrine by sharing this bond of faith, this communion, where there is not unity of confession. That does not mean that we think everybody else is an unbeliever and going to hell. We do not judge anyone's faith, only the confession of faith. We cannot judge someone else's faith; for it is in the heart, and we cannot read hearts. But we can, indeed the Bible tells us often that we should judge what people say they believe, i.e., their confession of faith (Matthew 7:15; Romans 16:17).

Membership in a church body is a confession of faith. We may take it as a given that the individual accepts the teaching of the church he belongs to; if not, why does he belong to a church whose confession he does not share? Indeed St. Paul, when correcting the errors that had arisen already in his own day, urged that the Sacrament be given only to those who could examine themselves. Such examination, of course, was to be on the basis of the Word of God, an examination in which the one desiring the Sacrament could see his need for it, as well as Christ's supplying of his need in this precious means of grace (1 Corinthians 11:27-28). Where someone comes to us from another confession of faith, we are at a loss to know whether he can make such an examination or not.

Thus for his own sake we want to wait to offer the Sacrament until there is confession of faith that comes from the Scriptures and that includes separation from false doctrine. We would also withhold the Sacrament if a person's words or life were a flat contradiction of the union that otherwise should be assumed by his membership in our church. Accordingly, if a member persisted in holding to false doctrine or if a member refused to repent of sin and insisted that he was free to continue in sin, we would refuse to give such a person the Sacrament. The Sacrament is intended to comfort the penitent, not to encourage the obstinate, be he a persistent heretic or an unrepentant sinner.

May Christ out of His abundant grace and mercy grant that we stick with His simple and beautiful Sacrament as He instituted it! We are happy to submit our reason and our emotions and our will to His Word. And all the more so we want to do that because of the rich blessings that He has promised to us in that Word. For what could be more beautiful and consoling than this: Christ, who has left behind the sorrows and the pain of His earthly life and has ascended to heaven, has not abandoned us; He stoops down from heaven and comes to us poor sinners again and again to give us Himself and all that He has gained for us by His holy cross and passion, by His glorious resurrection and ascension!

Therefore we go to receive the Sacrament where the words of institution are repeated as the elements are set aside and distributed for our reception. We prepare to receive the Sacrament with repentant and believing hearts. For that is how the gospel is always to be received, no matter the dress that it wears. We remember Christ's sacrifice for our salvation on the altar of the cross. We most thankfully and gladly receive Him and His saving benefit according to His promise. We leave His altar consoled that He is still the Christ who is for us and now in this special way also with and in us. Could there be a better reason to rejoice in Him and to want to live with Him and serve Him until at last we see Him face-to-face and serve Him perfectly in heaven?