

## Who Receives This Sacrament Worthily?

I've preached a lot on worthy Communion, yet I never think I've done it enough. Understand the issue of Closed Communion, who can and can't commune together, is in play, but closed Communion focuses on who should commune together while worthy Communion focus on "a person". That means you. I sometimes wonder if 21<sup>st</sup> century people get this? People in earlier times didn't think anyone could be a worthy communicant every Sunday; do people today think anyone could be unworthy? And this troubles a confessional Lutheran pastor or should. Listen to 4<sup>th</sup> century Chrysostom: "I would sooner lose *my* body and life than to allow the body of the Lord to be given to someone unworthily, and I would sooner have my blood shed than sanction giving His most holy blood to an unworthy person" (*Hom. 83. In Matthew*). Now hear 19<sup>th</sup> Century confessional Lutheran, C.F.W. Walther: "For it is certainly true; there is hardly anything in all of pastoral care that causes more trouble for a faithful minister of the Church than wanting to deal conscientiously with admission to the Holy Supper" (*Closed Communion*, 294).

Since 1529, we've been saying it's fine to fast and dress nice. Yes, that's what 'bodily preparation' refers to. In 40 years, the only ones I know to have fasted prior to communing are pastors, not myself, but others. As far as 'bodily preparation' goes, that has gone by the wayside at the altar as it has in every area of life with the exception of weddings, funerals, proms, private clubs, and events that require semi-formal, formal, black tie, or black tie optional dress. But the concept of 'dress for success' is still in vogue and everyone who subscribes to this knows that the way you dress indicates something. However, it seems lots of people don't care, don't believe that, or wish to indicate they're free from conventional social norms. While on vacation, I went to an earlier service and so went to a grocery store when I would normally be at church. I was amazed at how many people, women especially, appeared to be in pajamas and slippers.

There's no debate about fasting. It means going without food on Sunday morning at least till you've receive Communion. Prior to 1955 Roman Catholics were required to go without food from the previous midnight (ODCC, *Viaticum*, 1436). Fasting confesses that the Lord's Supper is the Food of foods. It's the Bread of Life that no one can eternally live without. It's the viaticum, that is, "bread for the journey" into everlasting life. As we heard before, the Lord's Supper early on was called the Medicine of Immortality because it began now transforming these lowly bodies like unto Jesus' glorious body. In time, it begins clothing us to attend the Marriage Supper of the Lamb in eternity as Revelation depicts. (Rev. 19:9).

We confess fasting and dressing are fine, but they're only outward training. As a boy, I knew what I could and couldn't do in play clothes, school clothes, and the special, church clothes. Clothes outwardly trained me in the military too. We had fatigues, Class A's, B's, and Dress Blue uniforms for use at different times. But outward training can't make anyone "worthy and well prepared." And James warned the Church: "If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, 'Here's a good seat for you,' but say to the poor man, 'You stand there' or 'Sit on the floor by my feet,' have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts" (2:3-4)? And look how going without food led to problems at Corinth? It led Paul to admonish, "If anyone is hungry, he should eat at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment. . . (1 Cor. 11:34).

It's fine to fast and dress, but worthy Communion consists in knowing what Communion is and why you come for it. The Large Catechism says: "For we do not intend to admit to the sacrament and administer it to those who do not know what they seek or why they come" (LC, v, 2). Some have erred and made this the only requirement for communing guests. No, they may know the what and why of the Supper, but they differ on other things like Purgatory, Ordination of Women, Election, Baptism, etc.. To allow conflicting confessions of what God says to come to the same altar is wrong. I don't want to focus on Closed Communion but let me quote what a 20<sup>th</sup> century German Lutheran said of Communion practices in the first 4 centuries of the Church: "The modern theory that anybody may be admitted 'as a guest' to the Sacrament in a church of differing confession, that people may communicate to and fro in spite of the absence of full church fellowship is unknown in the early church, indeed unthinkable" (Elert, *Eucharist & Church Fellowship*, 175).

Holy Communion is what Jesus says it is. The very same Body He gave over to death and the same Blood He shed on Calvary. It doesn't look like anything but Bread and Wine even as Jesus didn't look like the Son of God. But the 'pagan' centurion could see who He was even in death. And what sort of king did Jesus look like? Yet the thief asked to be remembered when Jesus came as king. And Jesus promised paradise to him even as the jaws of hell were yawning wide to damn Jesus for 3 eternal hours. In the same way that Jesus says, "I forgive you", and yet, I still look like a sinner. In the same way as Jesus says that those who've died in Him didn't die. In the same way that the only difference between the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil was God's Word, so His Word says this Bread is Jesus' Body and this Wine is His Blood. If you don't take Jesus at His Word: stay away till you do.

Likewise, go by Jesus' words when you answer why you come to His table. Not to show off your clothes. Not to break your fast. But for the forgiveness of your sins because that's why Jesus says, "Take eat, take drink." Virtually every elder and even most confessional pastors say, "Take and eat" and "Take and drink". The Greek has no "and" here. By leaving it out, Jesus shows the reason He wishes you to take it is to eat or drink it. Not to take it home and worship. Not to take it and parade it around like Rome does. No, the only purpose He gives His Body and Blood here is for eating and drinking for the forgiveness of sins. If forgiveness is not what you come for, than don't eat or drink. That would be sinful; that would be unworthy and would bring on you physical weakness, sickness, and maybe even death. If you defend any sin,

then you don't want forgiveness for it. If you plan on staying in your sin or sins, then you don't want forgiveness. If you don't believe your sin was on Jesus when He died, then stay away.

And that brings up doubting. I saw a change in confirmands about the turn of the century. This 4<sup>th</sup> part of memory work began troubling them. It was in particular: "anyone who does not believe these words *or doubts them* is unworthy and unprepared." This generation didn't believe there was any such thing as an unreasonable doubt. That is, it was reasonable to doubt everything and down right silly or unintellectual to not doubt. I can't prove it, but I think this is linked to the educational system they grew up in being gaga over Critical Thinking. Doubting was equated with critical thinking and not doubting was failing to think critically. Even the way Confessional Lutherans have historically taught confirmands to examine themselves became fraught with danger. Am I sorry for my sin? Do I believe what Jesus says is here to forgive them? Do I intend to mend my ways? Their consciences were slipping in the little word "enough" based on doubting going hand and glove with thinking. Am I sorry, believing, or mending *enough* to go to Communion: the answer will always be no or more doubt.

I still teach the 3 questions, but I show them the pitfall inherent in their way of thinking. Then I show them Luther's "Christian Questions with Their Answers For Those who Intend to Go to the Sacrament." This is another thing Luther is said to have written but was not included till after his death. I like it just the same. The questions are fact based, objective. I always point them to question 18: "Finally, why do you wish to go to the Sacrament? That I may learn to believe that Christ, out of great love, died for my sin, and also learn from Him to love God and my neighbor." We don't commune because we think we've arrived at a certain level of repentance, faith, or goodness. We go to the Lord's Supper to learn. We never will, in this life, get beyond what the father asking Jesus to heal his demonized son said when the Lord told him all things are possible to the one who believes: Lord I believe! Help Thou my unbelief" (Mk. 9:23-24),

Even with all this, I still warn them the Devil, the World, or their Flesh, i.e. conscience, can get them so stirred up they won't know what to do. When that happens, I tell them to ask the pastor you expect to commune you. No confessional Lutheran pastor will tell you to eat, drink if he has any doubts about your worthiness. Why? Because if you come and you really shouldn't, that pastor believes, teaches, and confesses, that it's his sin not yours. The judgment of weakness, sickness, or death falls on him not you. Hear how blunt Luther is in a sermon about this: If I admit you [a manifest, impenitent sinner] to the Sacrament, then I take your sin on myself..." (LW, 58, 10).

And Luther knew about worthiness from the communicant's side too: Several times Luther resolved to go to Communion but when the time came his zeal vanished and he felt unworthy. He resolved to go next time. The same thing happened. "'But when God gave me the grace to perceive the devil's knavery, I said:... Then be gone with your and mine worthiness!' And I tore myself away and went to the Sacrament, also several times without previous confession (which is not my habit otherwise), to spite the devil'" (Luther *In the Name of Jesus*, 350-1). For Luther, "'The only kind of worthiness is that which accepts the promise of God.' That is why Luther criticized the communion prayer of the Mass.... 'Lord, I am not worthy that Thou shouldst enter under my roof, but say in a word, and my soul shall be healed.'" He didn't outright condemn it, but thought "one should cling to something much closer, namely, the words by which Christ instituted" His Supper'" (Luther, *Luther on Worship*, 136, fn. 53). Chief of which are "Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." Amen

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