



*“Now, what is the Sacrament of the Altar? Answer: It is the true body and blood of the Lord Christ, in and under the bread and wine, which we Christians are commanded by Christ’s word to eat and drink.”*  
*The Large Catechism of Martin Luther*

The Book of Concord is second only to the Bible in authority in Lutheran churches. It is, in fact, a tool to use in the interpretation of scripture. Martin Luther, Philip Melancthon, and a group of scholars known collectively as the Concordists, use scripture and systematic theology to provide the doctrine by which we, as church, are governed. In order to be ordained in the ELCA, candidates must demonstrate an understanding of and agreement with this doctrine – especially as it pertains to the Preaching of the Word and Presiding over the Sacraments. I take this seriously and refer to it often, when having to make decisions about my pastoral duties.

One thing that is clear is that no one can receive a sacrament on their own. No one can baptize oneself. And no one can eat and drink the Lord’s supper by oneself. At the time of Luther, the Catholic Church allowed priests to do private masses for a price. Throughout the book of Concord there are several arguments against this practice – not only because it was charging money for the receipt of God’s grace, but also because the Lord’s Supper is meant to be communal.

The question many pastors had during COVID, was whether or not a recorded or livestreamed service qualified as “communal.” The bishops and seminaries all said “no.” They issued statements to all pastors explaining clearly why virtual communion didn’t qualify as the Lord’s Supper. In large part, it is because the definition of a sacrament is the bringing together of the elements (bread and wine) with the scripture: “In the night in which he was betrayed...” As the building doors remained closed, some pastors chose to disobey out of a deep concern for the spiritual care of their congregation. No one took these decisions lightly.

Now, we are no longer in the midst of a pandemic lock-down. Our church doors have been open since May 2021. There is no longer a need to wrestle with the question. Communion can only be done in community. What about the people that are unable to physically come to the church? In that case, we are taking the community of the church to them in their home. This is why lay people are encouraged to take the meal to other members of the church. It isn’t a private mass, but an extension of the supper served from Christ’s own table (the altar). Our doctrine is clear that it isn’t the pastor that makes the bread and wine the true body and blood, it is the words of Christ spoken over it within the midst of a community of the faithful.

Ultimately, it is my responsibility as your pastor to determine how and when people receive the sacraments. I do this on behalf of the ELCA. Based on my understanding of the Bible and the Book of Concord, I would not deny communion to anyone. The only requirement in the ELCA is that someone be baptized, but I would happily serve someone communion first with the expectation that the working of the Holy Spirit would lead them to seek out greater understanding of both sacraments. I do not discriminate based on age or ability. There is nothing someone can do to earn the grace of God and that is what communion is – a gift of grace from our Lord. Thus, I want to serve it to as many people as want it and as often as they want it.

I cannot do a better job of explaining the importance of receiving communion as often as we are able than Martin Luther has done in the Large Catechism (a longer and more thorough explanation of everything in the Small Catechism written for pastors). I will give him the last word:

“Therefore, it is appropriately called food of the soul, for it nourishes and strengthens the new creature. For in the first instance, we are born anew through baptism. However, our human flesh and blood, as I have said, have not lost their old skin...Therefore the Lord’s Supper is given as a daily food and sustenance so that our faith may be refreshed and strengthened and that it may not succumb in the struggle, but become stronger and stronger”.