

# THE PRACTICE OF THE LORD'S SUPPER IN A CHRISTIAN CONGREGATION

*Southern Illinois District  
The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod*

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## THE PRACTICE OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

*(Pr. Herbert C. Mueller, Jr.)*

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### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this document is to provide background regarding what the pastors and congregations of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod confess and practice with respect to the Lord's Supper. We will pose a series of questions, answering them on the basis of Scripture because Scripture is God's inspired and inerrant Word. We will reference our Lutheran confessions as well since we confess them to be a true and correct exposition of Scripture. If we repeat what many (most?) already know, bear with us. In matters of this importance, nothing ought to be assumed. These questions arise out of the various discussions regarding communion practice that have taken place in our district during the past 10-12 years. In every case, Pastor and people together need to discuss, on the basis of Scripture, how each point is reflected in the teaching and practice of your congregation. This is not intended to be an exhaustive treatment of the subject, but both of these essays should be read as brief, down-to-earth guides for discussing these issues in our Southern Illinois congregations within the context of our (February 2006) convention mandated visitation program.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod has prepared two helpful documents that explain our doctrine and practice more fully than we have space for here: Theology and Practice of the Lord's Supper, A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, 1983, pp. 21ff, and also Admission to the Lord's Supper: Basics of Biblical and

## BASIC BACKGROUND QUESTIONS

***What is the Sacrament of the Altar?*** It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ given in the bread and wine for us Christians to eat and to drink. The bread and the wine are not symbols of the body and blood nor are the body and blood only spiritually present in the supper. We hear Jesus' words in their simplest and most direct sense. "This is My body." "This cup is My blood of the New Testament which is poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins." (Matthew 26:26-28). By the power of His own word, He gives His body and blood in and with the bread and wine. This presence of Christ's body and blood does not depend on the character of the pastor administering the Sacrament nor on the attitude or strength of faith of the recipient but depends completely on the word of Christ. We use bread and wine as the physical elements because that is what our Lord used, and we wish to remain faithful to His command. Our Synod also, in convention in 2001, resolved to encourage congregations to use only wine (not grape juice or some other liquid) for the Sacrament.<sup>2</sup> What about those cases where a person cannot receive alcohol? In obedience to our Lord's command, we have agreed as a Synod to use wine and that in those cases where alcohol cannot be used, the pastor should seek a solution that is both pastoral and honors our Lord's institution (e.g., dipping the bread in the wine slightly, or using a minute amount of wine).<sup>3</sup>

Stop and discuss: *How is this taught and practiced in our congregation?*

***For whom is the Supper intended?*** Jesus gives His body and blood to sinners for the forgiveness of their sins. The Lord's Supper is part of the Gospel. Again, it is not just a reminder of, but it actually gives the forgiveness of sins. Of course, this is the same forgiveness given in the Word, given in Baptism, given in absolution, that is, the forgiveness won for us by Christ Himself in His death and resurrection for our sins (Rom. 4:24-25). This forgiveness is not a commodity but the life-giving Word of the Son of God: "Your sin is forgiven you. Go in peace!"

God's wonderful gifts of forgiveness, life and salvation, however, are not received mechanically by

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Confessional Teaching, A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, 2001 Convention Proceedings, p. 141 (Resolution 3-16).

<sup>3</sup> Theology and Practice of the Lord's Supper, A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, 1983, details these pastoral concerns:

"All four accounts of the Lord's Supper speak of "the cup." The content of this cup was most definitely wine. The references in Matt. 26:29 and parallels to the "fruit of the vine" would not have suggested anything else to Jesus' listeners than the grape wine of the Jewish Passover ritual. [19] In 1 Cor. 11:21 there is corroboration that the early Christian church understood wine for "fruit of the vine." Some of the Corinthians, sadly, had abused the Holy Supper by becoming drunk. The color, type, or origin of the grape wine is a matter which Christians can select in accord with their situation.

"In the oft-cited pastoral circumstance of an alcoholic communicant, the counsel of foregoing Communion for a period of time or the action of diluting the wine with water (perhaps done at the Lord's Supper itself) are preferable. In the extreme situation where even greatly diluted wine may lead to severe temptation, no fully satisfactory answer, in the opinion of the CTCR, can be formulated. The counsel of completely foregoing Communion is clearly unsatisfactory. In this situation, too, the actions of diluting the wine with water or intinction would be preferable. The substitution of grape juice raises the question of whether the Lord's instruction is being heeded. Luther's openness to Communion in one kind is difficult in view of confessional texts which strongly urge the Biblical paradigm of both kinds, though the Confessions do not address the extreme situation.

"A similar pastoral problem is posed by those rare instances where a severe physical reaction is caused by the elements (as, for example, when the recipient is concurrently taking certain medications, or is simply allergic to one or the other of the elements). The pastor, in such cases, will surely stress the Gospel's power and total effectiveness in the individual's life and patiently seek a practical solution that both honors Christ's word and satisfies the desire to partake in the Lord's Supper." (pp. 14f).

simply going through the motions of the meal, but are received only through faith in Christ and His promise. Though all communicants receive the body and blood in the bread and wine, only those who believe Christ's word of promise regarding the Supper receive its benefits, namely the forgiveness of sins. "He who believes these words has what they say and declare, namely the forgiveness of sins."<sup>4</sup> The Augsburg Confession also teaches us that the Sacrament has been given "to awaken our faith and comfort our consciences when we perceive that through the Sacrament grace and forgiveness of sin are promised us by Christ. Accordingly, the Sacrament requires faith, and without faith it is used in vain."<sup>5</sup>

Our worthiness to come to the Lord's Table consists in the fact that Christ has made us worthy through our faith in Him as the Small Catechism also teaches, "He is truly worthy and well prepared who believes these words: For you and for the forgiveness of sins."<sup>6</sup>

Stop and discuss: *How is this taught and practiced in our congregation?*

***How often should the Lord's Supper be celebrated?*** Our Lord Jesus simply commanded, "Do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." (I Corinthians 11:25)

This command does not prescribe a precise formula but simply provides that the Supper should be celebrated often. Christian congregations are therefore free to make up their own minds as to how often is "often". In these decisions, congregations have been guided by the following: (1) The need and desire of the people for the precious gifts offered in the Lord's Supper. (2) The example of the early church in which congregations ordinarily celebrated the Lord's Supper every Sunday (Just because the early church did something, however, does not make it right or necessary for us. In this case, it appears that the early church assumed a weekly celebration.) (3) Lutheran congregations have also been guided by the confession and example reported by Phillip Melanchthon in the Apology to the Augsburg Confession: "In our churches, mass [i.e., the Lord's Supper] is celebrated every Sunday and on other festivals, when the Sacrament is offered to those who wish for it after they have been examined and absolved."<sup>7</sup>

Accordingly, The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, in 1995, adopted the following resolution (affirmed also by the Southern Illinois District convention in 1997) as an example for congregations:

*Resolved: That The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in convention encourage its pastors and congregations to study the Scriptural, Confessional, and historical witness to every Sunday communion with a view to recovering the opportunity for receiving the Lord's Supper each Lord's day.*<sup>8</sup>

***How should this guide a Christian congregation?*** Since there is no direct prescription as to how often the Supper should be celebrated, if a congregation does not celebrate the Supper every week, that does not mean it is somehow less Christian or somehow lacking as a Christian church. What I have found as a pastor, however, is that when the Supper is not celebrated weekly, on a particular Sunday without communion, there will always be people who would desire to receive it but are thereby told to wait a week or more. As a congregation seeks to serve all the people, the primary concern should be the need and desires of the people to receive the Lord's precious gifts. The example of the early church and our confessional witness to every-Sunday communion show us how the gifts of Christ may be offered to all who desire them. Within the realm of Christian freedom, therefore, I have always worked toward every-Sunday communion in the congregations I have served, not to follow a rule but to offer the Lord's gifts

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<sup>4</sup> Small Catechism, Part VI, Tappert, page 352

<sup>5</sup> Augustana XIII, Tappert, page 59

<sup>6</sup> Small Catechism, Tappert, p. 352

<sup>7</sup> Apology XXV, Tappert, p. 249

<sup>8</sup> Southern Illinois District, 1997 Convention Proceedings, p. 351 (Resolution 4-05)

freely, and to follow the example to which we are pledged by our confession.<sup>9</sup>

Stop and discuss: *How is this taught and practiced in our congregation?*

## SPECIFIC PASTORAL CARE QUESTIONS

***What else should inform our practice of the Lord's Supper?*** The 1995 Synodical convention adopted the following paragraph as part of its resolution regarding the practice of close communion:

*A responsible Lutheran practice surrounding the Lord's Supper will take into account the fact that the Supper is also an expression of the oneness of the congregation in Christ and in His Gospel. "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes." (I Corinthians 11:26) One who eats and drinks at an altar confesses what is taught from that altar, as Paul reminded the Corinthians: "You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than He?" (I Corinthians 10:21) Each communicant is called on to examine himself before God (I Corinthians 11:28) and to avoid creating divisions within the assembly (I Corinthians 11:17ff). Anyone who partakes of the Lord's Supper when he has not been reconciled with a fellow communicant sins against the unity of the body (Matthew 5:23-24). In addition, those who commune without discerning the body of the Lord or faith in Christ's promise eat and drink judgment on themselves (I Corinthians 11:29). They are guilty of profaning, not bread and wine, but the body and blood of the Lord (I Corinthians 11:27). This is why the Confessions of our Church assume a careful pastoral practice in connection with the Lord's Supper: "The custom has been retained among us of not administering the sacrament to those who have not previously been examined and absolved." (AC XXV, Tappert, p. 61)<sup>10</sup>*

The Scriptures referenced in this quotation have many implications for our practice of the Lord's Supper, both for the practice of closed communion (that is communing only those within the fellowship) and for the pastoral care of our members. In the sections below we will pose and answer (on the basis of Scripture) a number of questions in order to be able to discuss these issues carefully and faithfully.

***Does Scripture give us a proper age for beginning to receive the Lord's Supper?*** The simple answer is "no". Nowhere do the Scriptures or our Lutheran confessions specify an age at which it is proper to begin receiving the Lord's Supper. Though many Lutheran congregations have for years lived in the tradition that the end of the eighth grade is the best time, this is a human custom adopted by congregations within the realm of their Christian freedom. Actually, the time of first communion in the 500-year history of just the Lutheran Church has varied from one place to another anywhere between ages six and seven and the late teens (seventeen or eighteen). Nor is the rite or ceremony of Confirmation necessary for the reception of Holy Communion. **What is necessary is proper instruction in the fullness of the Christian faith**, also the meaning and purpose of the Sacrament as well as a confession of faith in what the Lord promises to give and to do in the Sacrament. In making decisions in this area congregations will certainly take into account the practices of neighboring congregations so as not to cause offense or misunderstanding.

***What are the concerns a congregation and pastor must have as they prepare children to receive the Lord's Supper for the first time?*** Whatever the age at which one begins to receive the Lord's Supper within our fellowship, the following concerns are paramount. Within the fellowship, what makes a person ready to receive the Lord's Supper is faith in the Word and promise of Christ, that His body and

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<sup>9</sup> Apology XXV, Tappert, p. 249

<sup>10</sup> Resolution 3-08, The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, 1995 Convention Proceedings, p. 121f

blood are “given and shed for the forgiveness of sins”. A careful practice of the Supper (as summarized in the above *italicized* quote) must include the fact that the pastor will be able to know and hear the confession<sup>11</sup> of those who commune. That is why the Lutheran confessions say that we do not admit to the Sacrament unless people are first examined and absolved.<sup>12</sup>

Stop and discuss: *How is this taught and practiced in our congregation?*

**Why is such a careful practice of the Supper necessary?** (1) First of all, we are simply following the teaching of Scripture, which includes the following aspects: we are called to examine ourselves and to “discern the body” so that we don’t eat and drink to our judgment (1 Corinthians 11:27-29); we are reminded that “*As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes*” (1 Corinthians 11:26); and we must always hear 1 Corinthians 11 along with chapter 10, where Scripture speaks to the unity of the body of Christ: “*The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation [communion] in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation [communion] in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread*” (1 Corinthians 10:16-17).<sup>13</sup> (2) Second, whether they realize it or not, those who receive the Lord’s Supper at our altar confess what is taught from that altar.<sup>14</sup> (3) Therefore, communicants are to avoid creating divisions within the assembly and are to forgive one another before communing together. We do not bring our divisions to the Lord’s Table, for it is the Sacrament of unity in the body of Christ. (4) All of this is why the Bible tells everyone who communes to examine themselves and so receive the Lord’s body and blood (1 Corinthians 11:28). This examination needs to consider both what the communicant will receive (the true body and blood of Christ for the forgiveness of sins) and what that body of Christ does for the fellowship (“*we who are many are one body*”). (5) Finally, each pastor is given the responsibility by God to be a faithful “steward of the mysteries” (1 Corinthians 4:1-2), to give out the Lord’s gifts as the Lord intended, taking into account all the Biblical concerns we have listed.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Both his confession of faith and his confession of sin!

<sup>12</sup> Augustana XXV, Tappert, p. 61

<sup>13</sup> The Sacrament is not only individualistic (“just between me and God,” as many think), but also includes a horizontal, corporate dimension. Neither our personal divisions, nor our divisions of confession or doctrine have any place at the Lord’s Table.

<sup>14</sup> By this phrase, “confess what is taught from that altar,” we have in view not only the teaching that in the Sacrament Christ’s body and blood are given in the bread and wine, but also the full body of Christian teaching: “You proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes” (1 Corinthians 11:26).

<sup>15</sup> A practical story to illustrate the need for faithful pastoral care: Suppose you are a new pastor in a congregation, just three months into this new ministry. There is a couple who are both members of the parish. The wife has been coming to church faithfully the whole time, but the husband, though he is a member, has not yet come. One Sunday she finally prevails on him to come to church with her. He agrees, reluctantly, thinking, “OK, I’ll go, maybe I’ll score some points with the wife, but I’m not really going to participate.” Then, during the offering, the wife notices that there will be communion and she pokes her husband and begs him to come to communion with her. Again, feeling put upon, he agrees, silently thinking, “OK, I guess I’ve got no way out unless I want her to be upset with me, so I’ll go up there with her – but it’s just a bunch of rigmarole and doesn’t mean much anyway – anything to keep her happy.” You as pastor, of course, do not know this. You are just glad to see them both in church together, and so you commune them. After all, he is a member of the parish. Now here’s the question: Does the husband receive the body and blood of Jesus? Here my experience is that many people will answer, “No, he doesn’t believe it.” But that common misunderstanding makes the presence of Christ’s body and blood dependent on our faith. Instead, what makes the body and blood present is solely the Word and promise of Christ. This man who doesn’t believe still does receive the body and blood, but instead of forgiveness, he receives judgment. What does a loving pastor do in such a case? In the way I’ve described the situation, he would have no reason to pass him by at the altar (we cannot look into his heart), but the pastor ought to talk with the man soon to get to know him and to inquire of the condition of his soul. There is no other way to be a “faithful steward of the mysteries.” The man needs to hear the Scripture’s exhortation to “examine himself and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup” (1 Cor. 11:28). The

Stop and discuss: *How is this taught and practiced in our congregation?*

***What is to be the focus of the examination and of the Pastor's care?*** The relationship of each communicant both to the Lord of the Supper and to the Lord's body – "*Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.*" (*I Corinthians 11:28 RSV*). This Word of God applies to all who come to the Table. But what is the frame work of the examination? It's the very nature of the supper. In eating the Lord's Supper, we do want to proclaim (by eating and drinking the body and the blood) the death of the Lord (v. 26). We do not want to profane (v. 27) the body and blood of the Lord or eat and drink judgment on ourselves, not discerning the body (v. 29). If a communicant receives the Supper without discerning the Lord's body and blood (in other words, without faith in the promise of Christ to give His body and blood in and with the bread and wine), he eats and drinks judgment on himself. Nor do we bring our doctrinal divisions to the Lord's Table because such divisions are not fitting when the Lord is giving His one body (*I Corinthians 10:16-17*).<sup>16</sup> **Such examination will at least include, in a manner appropriate to the age of the individual, confession of sin, trust in the promise of Christ, a desire for the Lord's gifts, and a recognition of the unity of the faith shared by those who commune together.**<sup>17</sup> That is the broader framework in which those who come are told to examine themselves and should also be the focus of the Pastor's care.

The relationships we consider in this examination (both our personal examination and the pastor's care) run in two directions – there is the communicant's relationship to Christ as well as the communicant's relationship to those who are at the Lord's Table with him. The individual and the pastor are to be concerned with both dimensions. In terms of the individual's relationship to Christ, the simplest questions at the heart of the examination are this: "Why am I coming to the supper? What do I need? What is given here? Who is here with me?" In the immediate situation in Corinth, each individual should ask, "Why am I eating? Am I eating here to fill my belly and have fun with my friends? Or am I here to receive the Lord's body and blood and proclaim His death until He comes again?" And because verses 26, 27, and 29 have application beyond the situation in Corinth, so the examination also applies beyond the immediate situation in Corinth. What then are the questions we are to ask in this examination today? Boiling it down to the basics, our questions should include, "Why am I here at the Lord's table? Where is my focus? What am I looking for? Am I here to receive the Lord's body and blood (from Matthew 26 we would add, "for the forgiveness of sins") and proclaim the Lord's death until He comes? Or am I here for another purpose? Why do I need to receive this meal? In whom is my faith? What does the Lord, whose Supper it is, promise to give me and all who commune with me? What am I looking for Christ to do in His body of which I am a member? Am I bringing any divisions to the Table?"

This implies that the Sacrament is more than just my relationship to Jesus. When we commune, we commune together, with others, with a body. Together we "proclaim the Lord's death until He comes" (11:26). Together we receive the bread and wine, which are a communion in His true body and blood. "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body..." (10:17). We are called to "discern the body" (11:29) as we commune. First and foremost, this means that we believe and confess the true body

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pastor needs to take seriously our confessional commitment to "examine and absolve" communicants (AC XXV, Tappert, p. 61). The purpose of this example is simply to illustrate the loving reason for our careful practice of the Lord's Supper in the Lutheran Church.

<sup>16</sup> For instance, when people who are not in agreement with one another on what they confess before the world ("proclaiming the Lord's death," i.e., the doctrine taught from that particular altar) commune together, they are ignoring the corporate nature of the supper and sinning against the unity of the body of Christ. When we discover doctrinal divisions among us, what do we need to do? Ignore them? No, we seek to resolve them under the Word of God so that we say the same thing together.

<sup>17</sup> The church is one body in Christ. There is "one Lord, one faith, one baptism," etc. (see I Corinthians 12:12-13; Ephesians 4:4-6 *et al*).

and blood of Jesus present in the bread and wine for the forgiveness of sins. All who come receive the body and blood of Christ. Those who believe the Lord's promise receive the benefits they give – forgiveness, life and salvation. But the Sacrament gives more. It is also intended to maintain the corporate identity and unity of the church as the body of Christ. We are what we eat – the body of Christ (10:17). This aspect of the Supper must also be in view when the Scripture tells us to “examine” ourselves and “so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself” (11:28-29). What happens, then, when there are divisions in the body of Christ? Do we ignore them in hopes they will go away? Do we commune together anyway, despite the divisions? How can we, when the Scripture says, “I hear there are divisions among you...” (11:18) and also “Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not.” (11:22)?<sup>18</sup> The sad fact is that there are many divisions within Christendom today. The faithful pastor will therefore examine those coming to the Lord's Table so that they do not, by their disunity, dishonor the Lord or fail to discern His body. Individuals at odds with one another ought to be reconciled in the peace of Christ. Persons who are part of another confession of faith are asked to refrain from communing at Lutheran altars until such divisions are resolved.<sup>19</sup> The CTCR document, Admission to the Lord's Supper, is a very helpful study of the issues involved here. Note the following from that document:

The faith of one who communes worthily includes faith in Christ in a general way as well as faith in the real presence of Christ's body and blood. Moreover, faith in the Sacrament's benefits is also required, and especially its purpose to maintain the corporate identity and unity of the church as the body of Christ. Thus, faith in the Sacrament's benefits also moves in two directions: towards the blessing of renewed relationship with God in Christ as well as toward the blessing of preserved and restored unity with fellow communicants.<sup>20</sup>

Taking into consideration the whole context of I Corinthians 10 and 11 then, Scripture teaches that we are called to discern the nature of the Supper – both what it is (the body and blood of Jesus under the forms of bread and wine) and what it does (bring the forgiveness of sins as well as make us one body).

Stop and discuss: *How is this taught and practiced in our congregation?*

***How does the church see to it that children (or adults) are prepared to receive the Supper in a worthy manner?*** Many congregations provide careful instruction leading to the Rite of Confirmation and first Communion at the end of the eighth grade. Some of our Lutheran congregations do the same things in the fifth and sixth grades, confirming at the end of the sixth grade or perhaps the seventh grade. A few Missouri Synod congregations commune children at an earlier age, ten or younger, by first instructing the children in the purpose and promises of the Lord's Supper, then admitting them to the Supper, then continuing the instruction for several years after that.<sup>21</sup> The Rite of Confirmation is not essential to this process. **What is essential is ongoing instruction in the Word of God.** The Rite of Confirmation is simply a human ceremony designed to help people affirm and profess their faith in the promises of God in Baptism. Congregations will be very careful about any change in their practice in this area so that they do not (wittingly or unwittingly) lessen the importance of this ongoing instruction.

We do learn from history that the Lutheran church in Saxony, for 150 years after Martin Luther,

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<sup>18</sup> The CTCR document, Admission to the Lord's Supper, explains further: “...the divisiveness of the Corinthian Christians in their Eucharistic assemblies was such a heinous affront precisely because the Lord's Supper is divinely given to maintain and preserve spiritual unity among those who gather. To gather in disunity, then, is to contradict directly the very nature of the Sacrament and the purpose for which it exists.” (p. 7)

<sup>19</sup> These may be resolved by the individual who is not a member of our church being instructed and confirmed, or may be resolved corporately by the church bodies coming to full doctrinal agreement in pulpit and altar fellowship.

<sup>20</sup> Admission to the Lord's Supper, p. 20.

<sup>21</sup> Congregations that practice an earlier communion must be sure that the catechetical instruction actually does continue after first communion.

did not have any Rite of Confirmation. Ongoing instruction in the Word of God was provided for all children. When the pastor, the parents, and the child agreed that the child was ready to commune, the child simply began to commune. The instruction in the Word of God never came to an end but was ongoing. A child might commune at age six or seven or age ten or fourteen. It all depended on when the pastor, the parent, and the child agreed that he or she was ready.<sup>22</sup> In that manner, the church took seriously the instruction received in the Large Catechism of Martin Luther, first that children can more easily grow in their understanding of the Word of God as they are receiving the Lord's Supper once they confess their faith in the promise of God given in the Supper and, secondly, the instruction that we do not intend to give the Supper to those who do not know "what they seek or why they come".<sup>23</sup>

However, we are not able in 21<sup>st</sup> Century America to duplicate the conditions in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century German territorial churches. In our post-modern context (rife with American denominationalism) we need always to be sure both adults and children are well catechized in preparation for the Sacrament. There is much in society and the church at large that can lead away from Christ. All our catechumens, whatever their age, need to be well-grounded in the faith. Congregations moving toward earlier communion<sup>24</sup> must not in so doing reduce the catechetical requirements for proper preparation for the Sacrament. By the act of communing at the altar in our church, every communicant confesses what our church teaches, and needs to have a good understanding (age appropriate, of course) of what that teaching is. Discerning the Lord's body includes faith in His promise to give His body and blood as well as our participation in the unity of the faith we confess. That's why we so carefully instruct our people in the Word of God and prepare them fully before they commune.

Stop and discuss: *How is this taught and practiced in our congregation?*

***Why would children younger than the eighth grade need to receive the Lord's Supper?*** The simple answer is "sin". The fight against sin does not begin in the eighth grade or sixth grade. Children at a younger age can benefit from the promises of the Lord in the Supper provided they receive them in faith. Considering the many pressures even children struggle with today, some in our church have seen the benefit of preparing children for the Supper at an earlier age than the eighth grade. This ought not, however, involve a reduction in catechetical instruction, for there is always a delicate balance. We desire to allow children to come to the Lord's Table when they are ready, but we want to make sure they are well instructed and well prepared before they come.<sup>25</sup>

***Has The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod made a decision on this issue?*** In the 1960s and 1970s, there was a movement to separate First Communion from Confirmation, to have First Communion at age nine or ten and Confirmation at approximately age fifteen. In 1971, the Synod passed a resolution urging congregations to study their practice, but the resolution wisely made no prescription as to a proper age. Please note as well the following resolution of Synod (1992), which also emphasizes the need for extensive and complete instruction in the Word of God:

*Resolved, that every congregation of the Synod be encouraged to examine and enhance its efforts to prepare children and adults for confirmation and first Communion by*

- 1) providing extensive Lutheran catechetical instruction based on the Holy Scriptures, the Six Chief Parts of Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism, and a Lutheran hymnal;***
- 2) involving children's parents as fully as possible in the entire instruction and preparation process;*
- 3) establishing a policy for admission to first Communion (e.g. whether before or after*

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<sup>22</sup> See Arthur Repp, Confirmation in the Lutheran Church, Concordia Publishing House, 1964, pp. 15-20, 56.

<sup>23</sup> Large Catechism, Tappert, p. 447

<sup>24</sup> Please note: It is beyond the purpose of this document either to encourage or to discourage earlier communion.

<sup>25</sup> Of course, another whole essay could be written to describe the necessity and the scope of faithful catechesis. Any time the church compromises on faithful instruction in the Word of God, she loses.

- confirmation) that is sensitive to the diverse practices and customs of sister congregations; and*
- 4) *determining the age and time of junior confirmation carefully according to local circumstances and needs, taking into consideration the mobility of population and the practice of sister congregations.*

*(1992 Resolution 2-04)<sup>26</sup>*

Stop and discuss: *How is this taught and practiced in our congregation?*

***What about so called "infant communion"?*** We in our Synod have not practiced "infant Communion" because it does not allow for proper instruction or examination according to the biblical and confessional concerns raised above. Therefore many do not believe it to be a wise practice in our time, though one ought never call "infant Communion" a heresy. Congregations have the freedom to make up their own mind regarding a responsible practice of the Lord's Supper within their midst according to the concerns we have outlined. However, any decisions made within the realm of Christian freedom must also consider the practices of neighboring congregations so as not to cause offense or misunderstanding.

The focus for everything we do for the Lord's Supper always needs to be on Christ and on the precious gift He promises to give: **His body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins, as well as His work to unite us in His one body.**

***What about the practice of closed communion?*** This is one of the most misunderstood teachings of Scripture and our confession. What does it mean that we practice "closed communion"? Isn't that too exclusive?

First, the practice is based on the Bible's teaching about communion. So far, we have focused on Christ's Word of promise that He gives His true body and blood in the bread and wine of His Supper. This is not pious opinion, but the clear Word of Christ: "This is my body," words we simply take at face value. Christ's Word gives what it says.

We have also studied at the teaching of Scripture that all who come to the Supper are to examine themselves: "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself." (1 Corinthians 11:27-29). We have looked at the Scripture that reminds us we are not to bring our divisions, whether personal or doctrinal, to the Lord's Table (1 Corinthians 10:16-17). On the basis of these passages from the Word of God the Lutheran Church has historically practiced what is called closed communion (some use the word "close," but it's really the same thing). This means that, as a general practice, Lutheran altars are closed to those who do not confess Christ and His Supper according to His clear Word, and are not united in the same confession of faith (see below, pages 16-19 for the full explanation of our practice).

Are you serious, some might ask? Isn't this practice unloving and restrictive? Just a vestige of Synod's German past and something we ought to change? The answer is yes, I am serious and no, it is not uncaring. It is actually the loving thing we need to do for those who do not "discern the Lord's body," that is, who do not believe Christ gives His body and blood with the bread and wine. Remember, those who receive communion without faith in Christ's promise still do receive His body and blood, yet not for blessing but for judgment. (1 Corinthians 11:29). In addition, the Lord's Supper is the Sacrament of unity, to which we do not bring our divisions, neither personal nor confessional. We receive one bread

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<sup>26</sup> The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, 1992 Convention Proceedings, p. 110 (emphasis added).

– the body of the Lord that makes us one body, “because there is one bread, we the many are one body” (10:17).

That’s why, as faithful “stewards of the mysteries,” Pastors normally refrain from communing those who do not yet share our confession. But Pr. Mueller, no one can see inside another to judge his faith and isn’t that why Paul tells each individual to examine himself? Yes, and that’s also why we ask what a person’s outward confession is. If someone who belongs to a church of another confession<sup>27</sup> comes to the altar of a Lutheran Church, he is living a contradiction and, if he does not believe Christ’s body and blood are truly present in the bread and wine, he is even putting himself in danger of judgment. That’s why the loving thing for the Pastor and congregation to do is to refrain from communing him until we have the opportunity to talk with him about his confession and to teach the truth. “Discerning the body” requires faith that Christ’s true body and blood are received in, with, and under the bread and wine as well as faith in the effects of the Sacrament: the unity of the church.<sup>28</sup> At the altar we are confessing the unity of the faith in a concrete way. We ought not bring divisions to the altar (whether personal or doctrinal). This is also why we instruct people so that they know what is confessed at that altar and can then join in that unity if that is in fact what they believe as well.

Does this mean we are better than every one else? Or that we believe only Missouri Lutherans will be in heaven? Of course not – on both counts! It’s not a matter of who we are, but of confessing Christ’s Word. And none of us are saved by being Missouri Lutherans, Southern Baptist or whatever, but by faith in Jesus Christ. The point is that differences in the confession of faith are not to be ignored or papered over, but resolved under the Word of God.<sup>29</sup>

Stop and discuss: *How is this taught and practiced in our congregation?*

***How does a congregation then administer the Lord’s Supper in its midst?*** God does not give congregations a rule book or legalistic checklist, but God gives each congregation a pastor whose responsibility it is lovingly to care for those who come to the Supper. What does the pastor take into account?

- First of all, the pastor remembers what the Supper is – the body and blood of Jesus given under the forms of bread and wine for the forgiveness of sins. These blessings and benefits are received through faith in Christ and His promises.
- Yet those who commune without discerning the body of the Lord or faith in Christ’s promise eat and drink judgment on themselves (I Cor. 11:29). They are guilty of profaning, not bread and wine, but the body and blood of the Lord (I Cor. 11:27).

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<sup>27</sup> For instance, a church body that believes the bread and wine merely symbolize Christ’s body and blood, or a church that denies other clear teachings of Scripture.

<sup>28</sup> Admission to the Lord’s Supper – “Second, ‘discerning the body’ implies faith in and desire for the *effects* of the Lord’s Supper. The Lord’s own words of institution (Matt. 26:28) indicate that the primary benefit of the Eucharist is the forgiveness of sins. Yet in the Corinthians situation Paul focuses so strongly on the corporate character of benefits of the Supper that the forgiveness of sins receives scarcely any attention. The Eucharist is God’s means for preserving the unity of the church, maintaining the many Christians as one body since they all eat of the one loaf (1 Cor. 10:17). To create divisions is to contradict the character and purpose of the Sacrament, and to fail to discern the body.” (p. 19)

<sup>29</sup> For further study of this issue, see the section on “Communicants as Confessors” in Admission to the Lord’s Supper, pp. 42ff.

- In addition, the Supper is an expression of the oneness of the congregation in Christ and in His Gospel. "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes." (I Cor.11:26).
- One who eats and drinks at an altar confesses what is taught from that altar (I Cor. 10:21). We are called to confess together all the truths of Scripture, because we are "one body" (10:17).
- Each communicant is called on to examine himself before God (I Cor. 11:28) and to avoid creating divisions within the assembly (I Cor. 11:17ff). Each communicant ought to be instructed in and confess the doctrine taught in his or her own confession.
- Anyone who partakes of the Lord's Supper when he has not been reconciled with a fellow communicant sins against the unity of the body of Christ (Matthew 5:23-24).
- When members of confessional fellowships not united with us in Scriptural teaching are allowed to commune at the altars of our churches, we are bringing our divisions to the altar when this ought to be the Sacrament of unity (10:16-17).
- Confessional fellowships (synods, church bodies) will be sure they are in full agreement with each other before their members commune together (pulpit and altar fellowship). Individual members are confessors of the doctrine of their particular fellowship.<sup>30</sup>

All of this is why the Confessions of our Church assume a careful pastoral practice in connection with the Lord's Supper. Pray for your pastor that God would keep him faithful in his task as a steward of Christ's gifts! Help him by explaining our teaching in a loving way to any family or guests you bring to church with you.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Within a confessional fellowship such as the Southern Illinois District of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, pastors and church members normally DO commune with one another, because they DO share the same confession of faith. When personal divisions arise, we seek to be reconciled so as to avoid bringing those divisions to the Lord's Table. When true differences in doctrine arise between brothers and sisters within the same public confession (e.g. the SID), it behooves us to resolve such differences under the Word of God as soon as possible. Members of a fellowship will not prematurely separate themselves from communion fellowship with one another, but will go to each other and will not rest until differences are resolved. Neither will members of a fellowship force a brother or sister to go against his conscience. But before members of a confessional fellowship refuse to commune with other members of the same confessional fellowship, they must be sure that the differences are truly divisive of fellowship within that group. And if there are questions regarding the teaching or conduct of a brother, we are obligated to go talk with one another before any action to withdraw from fellowship. We also allow those given the responsibility to deal with such things time to do so. (Actually, another whole essay could also be written on this topic, but that's not our purpose here.)

<sup>31</sup> For a further explanation of our communion practice, see Theology and Practice of the Lord's Supper, A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, 1983, pp. 21ff, and also Admission to the Lord's Supper: Basics of Biblical and Confessional Teaching, A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, 1999. The CTCR has also prepared a **model communion card statement**: "The Lord's Supper is celebrated at this congregation in the confession and glad confidence that, as he says, our Lord gives into our mouths not only bread and wine but his very body and blood to eat and to drink for the forgiveness of sins and to strengthen our union with him and with one another. Our Lord invites to his table those who trust his words, repent of all sin, and set aside any refusal to forgive and love as he forgives and loves us, that they may show forth his death until he comes.

Because those who eat and drink our Lord's body and blood unworthily do so to their great harm and because Holy Communion is a confession of the faith which is confessed at this altar, any who are not yet instructed, in doubt, or who hold a confession differing from that of this congregation and The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, and yet desire to receive the sacrament, are asked first to speak with the pastor or an usher.

In the end, admission to the Sacrament is part of faithful pastoral care. **Pastors will endeavor to give the Sacrament to all for whom it is intended – penitent sinners who know what they seek and why they come – and will also seek lovingly to refrain from giving the Sacrament to those not yet instructed in Christian teaching, those causing divisions in the body, those who are openly impenitent, those who do not share the same confession of faith or those who reject Christian teaching.** This loving pastoral care takes into account both the individual’s faith and confession and his relationship to other Christians. This is not the way of the Law (then we would formulate rigid checklists), but the way of the Gospel – God gives each congregation a pastor. We have outlined the concerns pastors need to take into account, but we also recognize we cannot possibly outline here every individual situation pastors will face.<sup>32</sup> Pastors within our Synodical fellowship will also trust one another to carry out this practice lovingly and faithfully and, if there are any questions, to go to the brother to discuss them under the Word of God in a fraternal manner.

Stop and discuss: *How is this taught and practiced in our congregation?*

Again, we are not seeking here to provide an exhaustive treatment of the subject, but we wish simply to provide a brief Biblical explanation of our doctrine and practice of the Lord’s Supper in a manner easily discussed as part of our district’s visitation program. We seek to grow together in a careful practice that honors Biblical doctrine and helps us live together in Christian love.<sup>33</sup>

*In Christ’s name,  
Rev. Herbert C. Mueller, Jr.<sup>34</sup>  
Epiphany 2007*

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For further study, see Matthew 5:23f.; 10:32f.; 18:15-35; 26:26-29; 1 Cor. 11:17-34.”

<sup>32</sup> The Synod has recognized in its resolutions about closed communion that there are relatively rare pastoral care situations in which exceptions are made for good pastoral reasons, stating in 1995: “Resolved, That the Synod reaffirm 1967 Res. 2-19 that ‘pastors and congregations of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, except in situations of emergency and in special cases of pastoral care, commune individuals of only those synods which are now in fellowship with us;’ and be it further

“Resolved, that the Synod reaffirm 1986 Res. 3-08, ‘that the pastors and congregations of The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod continue to abide by the practice of close communion, which includes the necessity of exercising responsible pastoral care in extraordinary situations and circumstances,’ and beseech one another in love to remember that ‘situations of emergency and special cases of pastoral care’ or ‘extraordinary situations and circumstances’ are, by their nature, relatively rare...” (Resolution 3-08, The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, 1995 Convention Proceedings, p. 122).

<sup>33</sup> Other scholarly reading on this topic:

Jeffrey A. Gibbs, “An Exegetical Case for Close(d) Communion: 1 Corinthians 10:14-22; 11:17-34,” *Concordia Journal* 21 (April 1995): 148-163.

A. Andrew Das, “1 Corinthians 11:17-34 Revisited,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 62 (1998): 187-208.

Mark P. Surburg, “Structural and Lexical Features in 1 Corinthians 11:27-32,” *Concordia Journal* 26 (July 2000): 200-217.

Mark P. Surburg, “The Situation at the Corinthian Lord’s Supper in Light of 1 Corinthians 11:21: A Reconsideration,” *Concordia Journal* 32 (January 2006): 17-37.

<sup>34</sup> While President Herbert Mueller is the primary author of this document, at every stage of the drafting process he has depended heavily on the advice and suggestions of others, most notably the members of the Board of Spiritual Care and Supervision of the Southern Illinois District (Circuit Counselors and Vice Presidents) as well as Pastor Mark Surburg, Marion, IL.

**Appendix:** *The following paper was originally prepared in 1998 for the Holy Communion Study Group in the Southern Illinois District, a group formed to study together issues of communion practice in our District when there were pastors advocating for “the communion of all the baptized,” or “infant communion.” This paper is more of a scholarly approach to the question of what is to be included in the Biblical injunction to “examine oneself” and so in this manner eat and drink (1 Corinthians 11:28). Though this paper is written more for pastors (see the references to the Greek text of the New Testament), we offer it here as a further discussion of the need for examination and preparation for the Sacrament. Because of the context in which it was written this study did not originally deal directly with the issue of “closed communion,” but addressed simply the nature of the examination in 1 Corinthians 11:28. Two paragraphs have been added in order to make sure both documents reference both the vertical and horizontal dimensions of the Sacrament.*

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## **WHAT DOES THE EXAMINATION PAUL DISCUSSES IN I CORINTHIANS 11 DEMAND OF THE INDIVIDUAL?**

### **Preface: The Context of Our Discussion**

Our purpose in this discussion is not the initiation of a disciplinary action against any one. We have acknowledged several disagreements regarding the proper application of I Corinthians 11. Our study group has been formed around the question: *"Is I Corinthians 11:17-34 to be applied to all communicants in the manner we Lutherans have traditionally assumed?"* Our desire is to study the issue together *"Biblically and confessionally in a careful and brotherly spirit."*

Despite our best intentions, there are two elements that serve to heighten the tension within the group as we go about this discussion. 1) We keep bumping into the fact that, at one level or another, this issue is for each of us an issue of "conscience bound by the Word of God". 2) We also do perceive that how we address and resolve our questions does have implications for the unity of our confessional fellowship.

As much as possible, however, we must move beyond the tensions and continue to strive, with God's help, to listen carefully to His Word and to one another. The present study does not attempt to survey all the literature or review all the commentaries, but is an endeavor on the part of the author simply to listen to the text itself. Only God's Word will see us through our difficulties. May this (admittedly incomplete) study help us toward that goal.

### **I. What are the questions?**

What does *δοκιμαζω* mean in the context of I Corinthians 11? Whom does St. Paul have in view in this passage? How does *δοκιμαζω* fit into the wider context of the passage? Does the examination Paul is talking about apply only to the Corinthians? Are there pastoral care applications here? What sort of directions for pastoral care need to be made from the text? What is the relationship of the catechism's definition of self examination to this Scripture passage? Is the issue we are discussing a matter of Biblical interpretation or a simple question of pastoral care? What difference does our answer make? Perhaps the better question is, how should I Corinthians 11:28 inform our pastoral care of those who come to the Lord's table? What implications will our answers to these questions have for the unity of our fellowship?

Other related historical questions are interesting as well but are beyond the scope of this paper. For example, whatever our understanding of the examination Paul has in view here, how does that fit with the

fact that, historically speaking, much of the church communed infants for over a thousand years? Was the church sinning when in the past it communed infants? Are those portions of the church that presently commune infants sinning by doing so? Has the Lutheran church been sinning for the past 500 years by not communing infants? Again, it may be more helpful to ask instead, what are the pastoral care concerns that lead portions of the church to commune infants? What are the pastoral care concerns that lead the Lutheran church not to commune infants? How do other Scripture passages regarding the Lord's Supper apply to these questions?

In other words, even after we finish our study of I Corinthians 11, the group will still need to sort out whether this is primarily and exegetical issue or a pastoral care issue. Do we include/exclude (whichever) infants from the table on the basis of our particular exegesis of the text, or is it a decision of pastoral care dawn from our understanding of how the text should be applied?

The present paper, however, is an attempt to understand briefly how *δοκιμαζω* is used in the context of I Corinthians 11:17-34. This is not an exhaustive scholarly work, but an effort to explain the meaning of I Corinthians 11:28 in a simple fashion.

## **II. *δοκιμαζω* in I Corinthians 11:28.**

In this passage, *δοκιμαζω* takes the form of a present imperative third person singular (*δοκιμαζετω*), meaning "to examine, put to the test, or approve after testing" (BAG, p. 201). Here the present imperative would imply an ongoing kind of action, rather than simply a one time event. The third person singular with *ανθρωπος* is used in an indefinite or general sense, as in "let a man do this...". Since the phrase is followed by the reflexive pronoun (*εαυτον*), "himself", the most natural translation would seem to be, "let a man examine himself", or "let a man approve himself after testing". Note: the verb is active, not passive or middle in this instance. Whatever the action *δοκιμαζω* signifies here, "a man" is clearly commanded to do it to himself. Having said this, we must also ask, what is the content of this examination to be? How is the examination to be done? To answer we will first summarize how the context within I Corinthians 11 informs the examination and then also make some remarks regarding also the wider context of *δοκιμαζω* in Scripture.

## **III. The immediate context in I Cor. 11**

In I Corinthians 11, Paul seems to be moving from the discussion of a specific problem in Corinth to a more general discussion of the Lord's Supper. In chapter 10:16-21, he has already dealt with issues threatening the unity of the body by referencing the Corinthians oneness in the body of Christ. In verses 17-22, he deals with divisions in the congregation and the fact that some members of the church are humiliating other members as they come together for the Lord's Supper. Other more complete papers have been presented regarding the details of the situation. The point here involves the *movement* of Paul's argument. From the specifics of the Corinthian problem, he moves to a more general discussion of what he had received from the Lord and also delivered to the church in Corinth, namely, the *Verba Christi*, the words of Christ Himself about the supper.

Verses 17-22 have specific application to the divisions in the church in Corinth and would have much to say to any situation where there might be divisions in the church. However, verses 23-26 are general and would speak to the church of all times and places, whether there are divisions or not. Here Paul is repeating the words of Christ about the Supper and the gifts Christ gives in the Supper. This movement from the specific situation to a more general application is also illustrated by verse 26: "For as often as (*οσακις γαρ εαν εσθητε*) you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes." Does this mean that only the Corinthians proclaim the Lord's death until He comes? No. All Christians who celebrate the supper and eat the bread and drink the cup as the body and blood of Christ proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.

That point is instructive for our consideration of verse 27, which begins: "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord." "Therefore" (Ὡστε) means that the gist of verse 27 follows from the point made in verse 26. "Whoever" (ὅς αν) refers back to verse 26 (which applies to all who eat and drink the Lord's body and blood). Paul's statements obviously apply to the specific situation in Corinth where the church was divided, but not only there. At the very least, the "for as often as you eat..." of verse 26 and the "whoever" of verse 27 seem to set up a framework for the command in verse 28 ("Let a man examine himself") much wider than the problems of the church in Corinth. Verse 29 seems to do the same, beginning, "For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body..." That is why the "whoever" (ὅς αν) leads this writer to believe that verse 27 applies whenever the Lord's Supper is celebrated.

In addition, the particle δε seems to connect the examination of verse 28 with the general statements of verse 27. Verse 28 begins, δοκιμαζετω δε ανθρωπος εαυτον. The particle δε provides the immediate connection with what goes before. The lexicon says, δε is "one of the most commonly used Greek particles used to connect one clause with another when it is felt there is some contrast between them, though the contrast is often scarcely discernible. Most common translations: *but*, when a contrast is clearly implied; *and*, when a simple connective is desired, without contrast; frequently it cannot be translated at all."<sup>35</sup> Very frequently, δε is a transitional particle pure and simple, without any real contrast intended.<sup>36</sup> Here it seems to function in a weaker sense but still pointing to the fact that what is said in verse 28 is something that follows from what is said in verse 27. The connection (though weak) would work something like this: "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord" (v. 27 RSV); it follows then: "Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup" (v. 28). In other words, because unworthy eating is a serious matter (it makes one "guilty," i.e. "liable" in some sense, of the body and blood of the Lord), it is important to examine one's self. This is also reinforced by the γαρ in verse 29, "For (*it also follows that*) the one eating and drinking without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself."

#### IV. Δοκιμαζω in Scripture

Of the several passages using the term in Scripture, perhaps the most interesting parallels are found in II Corinthians 13:5ff and Galatians 6:4. II Corinthians 13:5 reads: "Examine yourselves (*Εαυτους πειραζετε*), to see whether you are holding to your faith. Test yourselves (*εαυτους δοκιμαζετε*). Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you? - Unless indeed you fail to meet the test." (RSV) The Corinthian Christians are exhorted to put themselves to the test to see or to determine if they are in the faith. Unless they have failed to meet the test (are *αδοκιμοι!*), they are to realize that Jesus Christ is in them. Does Paul think they truly have failed? Probably not, but he wants them to realize that Jesus Christ is in them (by faith). It seems clear from the emphasis of both words that the Corinthians are the ones who are to examine themselves. In Galatians 6, Paul writes: "Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Look to yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But let each one test (*το δε εργον εαυτου δοκιμαζετω*) his own work and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor. For each man will have to bear his own load." (Galatians 6:1-5 RSV) While they hold on to one another and watch over each other as brothers in Christ, each Christian in Galatia is commanded to test himself or test his own works. Why? Christians are interconnected, but ultimately each one is individually responsible to God.

<sup>35</sup> A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, p. 170

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170

In Luke 12, *δοκιμαζω* is used to describe the action of interpreting the appearance of the earth and sky. In Luke 14, a man in Jesus' parable says he must examine the five yoke of oxen he has bought. In both cases, it seems the word means to "analyze and draw a proper conclusion." In other passages (Romans 2:18, Romans 14:22, Ephesians 5:10, Philippians 1:10, and others), the word involves "approving or giving the stamp of approval to something" (most often "what is pleasing to the Lord"). In I John 4:1, John tells Christians not to believe every spirit, but to "test (*δοκιμαζω*) the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world." (I John 4:1 RSV) Here Christians are directly specifically to test and/or examine those who come with messages purporting to be from God to make sure their message is not false. Verse 2 indicates that we know whether or not a spirit is false on the basis of whether or not the spirit confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.

All of these texts carry the thought of "examining" something, "testing" something, "approving" something, and finding it genuine or not genuine. *δοκιμαζω* then seems to involve a mental activity of examining something or examining one's self. If put in the form of a command, the command is addressed to the new man in Christ. Of course, what makes any person genuine before God is faith in Jesus Christ.

## **V. και ουτως**

Before going further, we must deal with the meaning of the *και ουτως* in verse 28. The best surface translation would seem to be "Let a man examine himself, and so from the bread let him eat and from the cup let him drink." More detailed study is necessary in our group to show for certain the meaning of *και ουτως*. Must it be understood: "Let a man (first) examine himself and then eat and drink..." Or, is it possible to maintain the reading: "Let a man examine himself in this manner: Let him eat and drink..." More study needs to be done, but to this writer, the *και* would seem to be an obstacle to the second reading since the *και* is an even stronger connector than the *δε* earlier in the verse. It seems the force of the verse should be: "Then (*δε*, in view of vs. 27) let a man examine himself and (*και*) in this manner (*ουτως* - *having examined himself*), let him eat and drink..."

## **VI. Focus and Framework of the Examination - δοκιμαζω**

What is the focus of the examination? One's self. But what is the frame work of the examination? It's the very nature of the supper. In eating the Lord's Supper, we do want to proclaim (by eating and drinking the body and the blood) the death of the Lord (v. 26). We do not want to profane (v. 27) the body and blood of the Lord or eat and drink judgment on ourselves, not discerning the body (v. 29). That is the framework in which those who come are told to examine themselves.

In view of all of this, perhaps the question at the heart of the examination is simply, "Why am I coming to the supper?" In the immediate situation in Corinth, each individual should ask, "Why am I eating? Am I eating here to fill my belly and have fun with my friends? Or am I here to receive the Lord's body and blood and proclaim His death until He comes again?" And because verses 26, 27, and 29 have application beyond the situation in Corinth, so the examination also applies beyond the immediate situation in Corinth. What then are the questions we are to ask in this examination? Perhaps they would include also, "Why am I here at the Lord's table? Where is my focus? What am I looking for? Am I here to receive the Lord's body and blood (from Matthew 26 we would add, "for the forgiveness of sins") and proclaim the Lord's death until He comes? Or am I here for another purpose? Why do I need to receive this meal? In whom is my faith? What does the Lord, whose Supper it is, promise to give me and all who commune with me? What am I looking for Christ to do in His body of which I am a member? Am I bringing any divisions to the Table?"

This implies that the Sacrament is more than just my relationship to Jesus. When we commune, we commune together, with others, with a body. Together we "proclaim the Lord's death until He comes"

(11:26). Together we receive the bread and wine, which are a communion in His true body and blood. “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body...” (10:17). We are called to “discern the body” (11:29) as we commune. First and foremost, this means that we believe and confess the true body and blood of Jesus present in the bread and wine for the forgiveness of sins. All who come receive the body and blood of Christ. Those who believe the Lord’s promise receive the benefits they give – forgiveness, life and salvation. But the Sacrament gives more. It is also intended to maintain the corporate identity and unity of the church as the body of Christ. We are what we eat – the body of Christ (10:17). This must also be in view when the Scripture tells us to “examine” ourselves and “so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself” (11:28-29). What happens, then, when there are divisions in the body of Christ? Do we ignore them in hopes they will go away? Do we commune together anyway, despite the divisions? How can we, when the Scripture says, “I hear there are divisions among you...” (11:18) and also “Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not.” (11:22)?<sup>37</sup> The sad fact is that there are many divisions within Christendom today. The faithful pastor will therefore examine those coming to the Lord’s Table so that they do not dishonor the Lord or fail to discern His body by their disunity. Individuals at odds with one another ought to be reconciled in the peace of Christ. Persons who are part of another confession of faith are asked to refrain from communing at Lutheran altars until such divisions are resolved. The CTCR document, Admission to the Lord’s Supper, is a very helpful study of the issues involved here. Note the following from that document:

The faith of one who communes worthily includes faith in Christ in a general way as well as faith in the real presence of Christ’s body and blood. Moreover, faith in the Sacrament’s benefits is also required, and especially its purpose to maintain the corporate identity and unity of the church as the body of Christ. Thus, faith in the Sacrament’s benefits also moves in two directions: towards the blessing of renewed relationship with God in Christ as well as toward the blessing of preserved and restored unity with fellow communicants.<sup>38</sup>

Taking into consideration the whole context of I Corinthians 10 and 11 then, Scripture teaches that we are called to discern the nature of the Supper – both what it is (the body and blood of Jesus under the forms of bread and wine) and what it does (bring the forgiveness of sins as well as make us one body).

## **VII. Some Other Considerations of Pastoral Care**

1) In I Corinthians 11, the exhortation, “*let a man examine himself...*” is made in a context in which Paul is dealing with divisions within the congregation. But why does it follow that that is the **only** situation the Scriptures have in view? If this text is applied **only** to those who are factious or schismatic (openly so?) then it would be hard to apply to anyone. Very few schismatics openly admit to being so. Most of the time, they would respond, “I don’t need to examine myself because I am not the schismatic one -- you are!” Would it not be the height of arrogance for anyone to say that this command does not apply to himself? But isn’t that why the Scripture says here of everyone who comes to the Table of the Lord, “*let a man examine himself...*” “How are you treating your brothers and sisters in Christ?” we are to ask.

2) All believers at all times receive the grace of God in Word, in Holy Baptism and where appropriate, at the Lord’s Table. But when the Lord’s Body and Blood are not given to those who are unable to examine themselves, we are not withholding grace from them, or somehow withholding the Gospel from them (are not Baptism and the Word equally effective?). This is an issue of Pastoral care, because of the consequences of receiving the Lord’s body and blood without discerning it -- you eat and

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<sup>37</sup> The CTCR document, Admission to the Lord’s Supper, explains further: “...the divisiveness of the Corinthian Christians in their eucharistic assemblies was such a heinous affront precisely because the Lord’s Supper is divinely given to maintain and preserve spiritual unity among those who gather. To gather in disunity, then, is to contradict directly the very nature of the Sacrament and the purpose for which it exists.” (p. 7)

<sup>38</sup> Admission to the Lord’s Supper, p. 20.

drink judgment on yourself. Even if this applies only to the factious, how is one to know he is not one of the factious? The word remains, "*let a man examine himself...*"

3) How is a Pastor to receive *anyone* at the Table except on the basis of his or her confession? The means of grace may be resisted. A Pastor can only go on what a person confesses with his or her own mouth and action. That's why we admit to the Table, not on the basis of the faith by which one believes, but on the basis of the faith which one confesses, because it is the only faith that can be known in the other -- the faith the other confesses. One cannot look into the heart of another. But isn't that another reason (in the context of proper Pastoral care) why all who would approach the Table are told, "*let a man examine himself...*"? And if a Pastor is concerned about the faith by which your parishioners confess, isn't that also why the Confessions say we do not admit people unless they have been examined and absolved? Or that we do not intend to give the Supper to those who do not know what they seek or why they come?

4) The issue of the apparent contradiction in the Confessions remains (more than one place has some sort of an examination in view while the Catechism and the Formula say that worthiness consists solely in the merits of Christ received through faith in His promise). What is the basis for worthy reception? Faith in Christ, that His body and blood are "given and shed for the forgiveness of sins". This is wonderful comfort for those who may know the promise but doubt their "worthiness." The examination, however, has in view the fact that "not discerning the body of the Lord" brings judgment. That is one reason why a careful practice of the Supper will include the fact that the pastor will be able to know and hear the confession of those who commune. Remember, this includes both the vertical dimension ("This is my body for you") and the horizontal dimension ("Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body" – 10:17) of the Supper. [Please see also the main study in this booklet for an in depth discussion of this aspect of the Supper.]

### **VIII. Concluding Questions**

"Why am I here? For what do I come?" Is that not the simplest understanding of the examination Paul has in view? Perhaps parallel questions rising from this discussion are not going to be answered specifically within the text of I Corinthians 11 (other texts are, after all, also applicable), but may well be issues of application and pastoral care. What is the proper age for first communion? How much instruction is necessary before one comes to the supper? Does a pastor need to hear a confession before one comes? How do the other Scriptural references to the Lord's Supper apply to the question of infant communion? How should the tension in our confessions be resolved? (Namely, the tension between the confession in the Formula of Concord that the supper is for all who have faith and the confession in the Large Catechism that we do not intend to give the supper to those who do not know why they come or what they seek.) Finally, how do we answer these questions together as a fellowship of those who confess Scripture and the Lutheran confessions as the sole norm of faith and life? We are called to bring them together to the Word of God and our confession.

*Herbert Mueller*  
*Epiphany 1998 (Revised Advent 2006)*