

Open, Closed, or Close Communion?

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Why we don't let any and all visitors partake of the Lord's Supper without an interview

I was raised in a denomination in the Philippines called Iglesia Evangelica Unida de Cristo, a widely evangelical church founded in 1932, during the early days of Protestantism in the country. We called it UNIDA for short, and many of our friends gave us weird looks when we mentioned the whole name because they all associated it with the Iglesia ni Cristo cult.

In our local church in Tondo, Manila, I remember not being able to partake of the Holy Communion (Lord's Supper) in my youth. When the young children turned 12 or so, they were encouraged to attend a "Communicants Class" for a number of weeks. There, we were taught the basic doctrines of the church, including the Lord's Supper. Of course, the only thing I learned from our church then was that the Lord's Supper was a remembrance of the death of Christ for my sins. Those who completed this class could then officially partake of the Communion as a communicant member.

Always on the first Sunday of the month, there will be more people in attendance, and women will be dressed in their Sunday best, because everyone knew that there would be Communion. As a youth, I didn't like rituals very much, and the Communion ritual was very long. We had two pastors alternating reading the ritual before the actual distribution of the bread and "wine" (grape juice).

However, what I remember is that our church allowed all the adults in attendance to partake of the Communion. A complete stranger might walk in and be offered to take the elements without anyone asking him any question about his faith, church membership or belief about the Communion. This seemed to be in contradiction to the church's rule about the prohibition against children taking Communion.

This practice is what I learned later as Open Communion, allowing anyone to partake of the sacrament, including little children (in some churches). The minister might offer a verbal warning against unbelievers partaking, but the communion is offered to everyone present. But in many churches, the elements are offered without qualification to everyone, as I saw in one of our children's college open-air orientation service.

In another church I visited, the other extreme is practiced. The pastor announced to the congregation that only official members of the congregation are allowed to partake of the Lord's Supper. No visitor is allowed, period. An exception is sometimes made if the visitor is a known member of another church in their own denomination. Other churches will have a special afternoon or evening communion service only for their members. This is called Closed Communion.

Pasig Covenant Reformed Church and Trinity Covenant Reformed Church (Imus) do not practice open or closed communion. In our Close Communion, we guard the table by allowing only our professing members to partake. However, we also allow non-professing regular

attendees who are in the process of becoming members to take Communion. Guests are also welcome to partake, but only after meeting with the elders to affirm their faith in Christ, their baptism and membership in good standing at a faithful Christian Church, and their understanding of the Lord's Supper.

Why do we "guard" or "fence" the Lord's Table? We are fulfilling two major responsibilities as officebearers of Christ's church. First, we guard the holiness of God by ensuring that no one desecrates the Lord's Supper, a holy sacrament instituted by our Lord Jesus Christ himself, by partaking without understanding or taking it lightly. Second, if unbelievers – which include those who are under discipline – and those without understanding are allowed to take Communion, they are partaking "in an unworthy manner" and are "guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord" and "eats and drinks judgment on himself." And not only the unworthy individuals suffer, but the whole church might suffer judgment in the form of illness or even death (1Cor 11:27-30).

The Heidelberg Catechism summarizes this issue in Q & A 81 & 82:

Question 81: Who are to come to the table of the Lord?

Answer: Those who are displeased with themselves for their sins, yet trust that these are forgiven them, and that their remaining infirmity is covered by the suffering and death of Christ; who also desire more and more to strengthen their faith and to amend their life. But the impenitent and hypocrites eat and drink judgment to themselves.[1]

[1]Ps 51:3,103:1-4;Mt 5:6;Jn 7:37-38;1 Cor 10:19-22,11:26-32

Question 82: Are they, then, also to be admitted to this Supper who show themselves by their confession and life to be unbelieving and ungodly?

Answer: No, for thereby the covenant of God is profaned and His wrath provoked against the whole congregation;[1] therefore, the Christian Church is bound, according to the order of Christ and His Apostles, to exclude such persons by the Office of the Keys until they amend their lives.

[1]Ps 50:16-17;Isa 1:11-17,66:3;Jer 7:21-23;Mt 7:6;1 Cor 11:17-34;2 Thes 3:6;Tit 3:10-11

My first taste of Close Communion was in Escondido United Reformed Church, when on the first Communion Sunday that my wife and I attended, we were greeted by an elder and were asked if we wanted to partake of the Lord's Supper. The elder also gave us a 1/2-page questionnaire to fill out. Though there were only three easy questions to answer, I felt awkward and uncomfortable, since that was our first experience of a Reformed Close Communion. Having answered "Yes" to all three questions, the elder welcomed us, "You're invited to partake of the Lord's Supper today."

Over a period of time, I learned more and more about the Reformed view of the Lord's Supper, and why it is very important for the elders to guard the Lord's Table. My attitude towards Close Communion ceased to be "legalistic" and "exclusivist" and instead turned into a joyful assurance that it is a wholly Scriptural practice.

So if you visited our church, and wanted to join us in partaking of this Holy Sacrament, do not be offended if we at first did not permit you to participate. We are guarding not only God's holiness, but also your soul, and the rest of the congregation's.

Form for Participation in the Lord's Supper

Name: _____ Date: _____

To Our Visitors:

Please answer the three questions below and give it back to the pastor or elders. If you can honestly answer ALL four questions below with "Yes," you are welcome to join us in partaking of the Lord's Supper.

1. Do you believe in Christ as your Savior, loving and trusting him as the one who saves you from your sin, and with repentance and joy embrace him as Lord of your life?

Yes No

2. Have you been baptized as an infant or adult with water, in the name of the Trinitarian God, and by a lawful minister?

Yes No

3. Are you a member in good standing of a church that believes that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone, all for the glory of God alone, based on the inerrant Holy Scriptures alone? See the back for a brief statement of beliefs of our church.

Yes No

4. Do you agree that the Lord's Supper is: (1) a remembrance of Christ's work on the cross for His people; (2) a participation in his body and blood; (3) and a nourishment of your soul?

Yes No