22. Who may receive Communion? (closed communion)

Often heard: "Why can't I take communion at your church? Isn't that unloving?"
Also heard: "Many Baptist churches close their own table to outsiders. Why is it unloving when Catholics do the same?"

The table open to believers who examine themselves

HELD BY Lutheran most; LCMS close · Reformed fenced by elders · Anglican baptized communicants · Methodist open to all · Baptist practice varies

The table is open to believers who examine themselves, and each church guards it in its own way: the ELCA welcomes all baptized visitors, Reformed elders "fence" it for professing members of churches that confess the gospel, the Church of England admits baptized communicant members of other Trinitarian churches, and United Methodists refuse no one who comes forward. Among Baptists practice varies. Many Baptist churches practice "open" communion for any baptized believer; some practice "close" communion (baptized believers of like faith) or "closed" communion (members of that congregation only). Landmark Baptists historically restricted it strictly.

VERSES CITED

1 Cor 11:27–29 (examine yourself); 1 Cor 10:17 (one bread, one body); Acts 2:41–42 (baptism before breaking bread).

WHERE THE IDEA COMES FROM

Strict (closed) communion was common among early English and American Baptists, including the Philadelphia Association; open communion was championed by John Bunyan (1670s) and Robert Hall (1815). Landmarkism (1850s) restricted it to the local church.

Communion only within one shared faith

HELD BY Catholic limited exceptions · Orthodox Orthodox only

Communion is the sign and cause of unity in one faith, so receiving it is a statement that one shares the Catholic faith, including belief in the real presence, and is in the state of grace. Non-Catholics normally do not receive; Orthodox Christians may in some circumstances, and other Christians only in grave necessity with Catholic faith in the sacrament. Catholics themselves must abstain if conscious of mortal sin until they have gone to confession.

VERSES CITED

1 Cor 10:16–17; 11:27–29; Acts 2:42; Eph 4:3–6.

EARLY CHURCH AND HISTORY

Didache 9.5: only the baptized may eat the Eucharist. Justin (*First Apology* 66): only those who believe the Church's teaching, are baptized and live as Christ commanded may receive.

CATECHISM AND COUNCILS

CCC 1385, 1398–1401, 1415; Code of Canon Law can. 844, 916.

Across the traditions

Who may receive Communion in each major tradition, in its own words and from its own documents.

Catholic

Communion is the sign and cause of unity in the Catholic faith, so non-Catholics normally do not receive, with limited exceptions for Orthodox Christians and, in grave necessity, other Christians who share Catholic faith in the sacrament; Catholics conscious of mortal sin must first go to confession. The full case is set out above.

Sources: CCC 1385, 1398–1401, 1415; Code of Canon Law can. 844 §§3–4, 916 (as cited in the chapter).

Orthodox

The Eucharist expresses and crowns unity in the one faith, so Holy Communion is given only to baptized and chrismated Orthodox Christians; professing belief in Jesus is not counted enough for admission. Communicants examine their conscience and cleanse it by repentance, with fasting and prayer, and confession is a necessary preparation after serious sin. The Church urges frequent Communion and requires every member to receive at least once a year.

Sources: Longer Catechism of St Philaret, Q 341, 343; Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, "Why Non-Orthodox are Excluded from the Sacrament of Holy Communion" (Fr Charles Bell), goarch.org; Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, "Understanding the Sacraments of the Orthodox Church" (Fr Thomas Fitzgerald), section Confession, goarch.org.

Lutheran

The Augsburg Confession says the body of the Lord is not usually given except to those "previously examined and absolved." The Missouri Synod practices close(d) communion: members in good standing of the LCMS and its sister churches commune, to keep unity of confession about Christ's true presence, with pastoral discretion in special cases. The ELCA practices "eucharistic hospitality": all baptized

Reformed

The Supper belongs to those who are displeased with their sins, trust that they are forgiven for Christ's sake, and seek to amend their lives. Those who are ignorant or scandalous, though professing faith, are to be kept from it by the keys until instructed and reformed, lest the covenant be profaned. Elders therefore guard ("fence") the table. The Orthodox Presbyterian directory, for example,

persons are welcomed when visiting, and an unbaptized person communed inadvertently is invited to learn the faith and be baptized.

Sources: Augsburg Confession XXV; LCMS, FAQs about Denominations, "Who can commune at a Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod congregation?" (lcms.org); ELCA, *The Use of the Means of Grace* (1997), Principle 37, Application 37G, Principle 49, Application 49A.

Anglican

The 1662 Prayer Book admits to Communion those confirmed or "ready and desirous to be confirmed," and bars open, unrepentant sinners until they are reconciled. The Church of England's canons also admit baptized communicant members in good standing of other Trinitarian churches, other baptized persons authorized by General Synod regulations, and any baptized person in danger of death.

Sources: Book of Common Prayer 1662, Order of Confirmation, final rubric; BCP 1662, Lord's Supper, opening rubrics; Canons of the Church of England B 15A.1(a)–(d).

Baptist

Practice varies: many Baptist churches open the table to baptized believers, some limit it to baptized believers of like faith (close) or to the congregation's own members (closed), and Landmark Baptists restrict it strictly. The full case is set out above.

Sources: Baptist Faith and Message 2000, art. VII (baptism prerequisite to the Lord's Supper); Second London Confession 28 (as cited in the chapter).

invites baptized, professing communicant members in good standing of a church that professes the gospel.

Sources: Westminster Confession 29.8; Westminster Larger Catechism Q 173; Heidelberg Catechism Q 81–82, 85; Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Directory for Public Worship III.C.3.

Methodist

United Methodists teach that the table belongs to Christ, who invites all who love him, repent of sin and seek to live as his disciples. The church has "no tradition of refusing" anyone who comes forward, whatever their age or church membership. Baptism remains the expected entry: unbaptized people who respond in faith are welcomed, then taught about baptism and counseled toward it as soon as possible.

Sources: United Methodist Church, *This Holy Mystery* (2004), "Invitation to the Lord's Table" (principle, background, practice), quoting *The United Methodist Book of Worship* p. 29 and *By Water and the Spirit* (Book of Resolutions p. 814).

Where it gets contested: Churches draw the line in different places. Catholic and Orthodox churches, the Missouri Synod Lutherans and Baptists who practice close or closed communion limit the table to

> those who share their faith, on the principle that communion presupposes shared faith; Reformed and Anglican churches admit communicants of other churches that confess the gospel; the ELCA, United Methodists and open-communion Baptists open the table most widely.

More: Chapter 11: the state of grace and worthiness for Communion

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