



# Who Decides If Communion Criteria Are Met?

Jon McCoy

An interesting question is currently receiving considerable attention and debate: “What specifically is meant by ‘Open Communion?’” Perhaps the most immediate reply offered by both the laity and clergy would basically suggest that all who approach the altar will be allowed to receive the Communion elements of bread and wine. Essentially, any individual, regardless of age, denominational membership, or any other distinguishing factor would be allowed to commune. While this assumption is widely held, another very important question exists that is rarely considered: “Is there ever an appropriate time that a person should not be allowed to receive communion?”

The understanding of the openness of the table is reflected in “The Invitation.” Those most familiar with the traditional Communion liturgy from both the Methodist and Evangelical United Brethren churches will easily recall the invitation: “Ye that do truly and earnestly repent of your sins, and are in love and charity with your neighbors, and intend to lead a new life, following the commandments of God, and walking from henceforth in his holy ways: Draw near with faith, and take this Holy Sacrament to your comfort, and make your humble confession to almighty God” (*The United Methodist Hymnal*, 1989). Others may be more familiar the revised liturgy which includes the words: “Christ our Lord invites to his table all who love him, who earnestly repent of their sin and seek to live in peace with one another” (*The United Methodist Hymnal*, 1989).

The Invitation is extended to everyone.

However, specific criteria are listed: those who earnestly repent, those who intend to lead a new life, those who seek to live in peace, and those who intend to walk in God’s holy ways. Who is to determine which individuals meet the criteria? *The 2000 Book of Discipline* (BOD) notes, “It shall be the duty of the pastor and the members of the church council by regular visitation, care, and spiritual oversight to provide necessary activities and opportu-

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nities for spiritual growth through individual and family worship and individual and group study to connect faith and daily living, and continually to aid the members to keep their vows to uphold the Church by attendance, prayers, gifts, and service” (§ 227.1). The BOD further notes under the Responsibilities and Duties of a Pastor that the pastor is “To preach the Word, oversee the worship life of the congregation, read and teach the Scriptures, and engage the people in study and witness” (§ 331.1a)

The pastor is to provide spiritual and temporal leadership in the Church, which includes guidance, counseling, support, and nurture, as well as, preparing individuals to understand and respond to “The Invitation.” Celebrations of the Lord’s Supper have implications not only for the individual, but also for the Church. The witness of the Church involves an expres-

sion and proclamation of faith that reflects the transformation of individuals into servants—those who will walk in God’s holy ways and live in peace. In *Theology of the Reformers*, George (1988) notes Zwingli’s assertion that partaking of the sacraments was proof to the church that an individual was a soldier of Christ. Even more, the partaking of the Lord’s Supper implies that one is aware of the liberation afforded through Christ’s sacrifice and is intent upon “living a new life.”

When these criteria are not sincerely considered, the witness of the Church is compromised, and questions arise regarding the true meaning of the sacraments and discipleship. As those who provide leadership to local congregations, pastors at the table help the gathered body of believers

prepare and respond to Christ’s invitation. Indeed, all are invited to follow God. However, those who accept the invitation are made aware of the expectations. The invitation to the table is for those who accept the conditions. The words included in the invitation are substantive, and are not simply included simply for theological flavor. □



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