

Pastor Burnell F. Eckardt, Jr.
answers

Why?



Why do we come to the altar to commune?

In churches of the Reformed or Baptist tradition, one commonly finds communicants staying in their pews as the trays are passed down the line, in much the same fashion as the offering plates. Communicants take a piece of bread, and hold it until all have received theirs, and then when the minister says, “Take, eat”, all eat at the same time. Then comes the tray of wine (or grape juice!) cups, after which the tray is passed again, to receive the empty cups.

In Lutheran churches, by contrast, communicants come forward to receive at the altar, as is also the case among Roman Catholics, Eastern

Orthodox, and Anglicans or Episcopalians. Why? This custom reflects our understanding of our participation in the Sacrament, that it is not a symbolic gesture. It *truly is* Christ, and therefore we, according to ancient custom, receive Him with the reverence that befits this faith.

Interestingly, many (though not all) of the churches who have the practice of staying in the pews for communion also have the custom of “altar calls.” Altar calls are invitations to come forward and “accept Christ” into one’s life. But those who come forward receive nothing. They might

get “slain in the Spirit,” falling down as if in a trance, or, in the less emotion-driven settings, they might simply stand at the front while prayer is said. They might get a hug. What a telling comparison: in one case (the latter) people come forward to *give* their lives to Jesus, while in the other, they come forward to *receive* their lives *from* Jesus—for in the Sacrament we receive the forgiveness of sins, where, according to the catechism, “there is also life and salvation.” Here is a stark contrast, then, between what essentially amounts, on the one

hand, to doing something (accepting Christ) to “get saved,” and on the other, doing something (coming forward for the Sacrament) because of what you already believe, namely that Christ is giving Himself to you there.

Does the difference matter? Surely the answer is clear. ☩

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