

Who Is To Be Welcomed To the Lord's Supper?

The Lord's Supper: A Soul-Strengthening Feast For God's People

Participating in the Lord's Supper is a wonderful means by which God nourishes the faith of his people, confirms them in the covenant, and comforts them in their salvation by reminding them of the finished work of Jesus Christ in their place. Communion is a gift of God's grace for weary pilgrims on the hard and narrow heavenly road, (Matt. 7:13-14). God's people should cherish this sacred supper and ever-rejoice in the gospel which it visibly proclaims to their souls each time it is properly served.

However, in our present time, where a spirit of *radical individualism* reigns unchecked, there has become much confusion about who is to be welcomed to the Lord's Supper. Strangely, we have forgotten our own covenant history by failing to realize that the Lord's Supper is the New Covenant expression of the Passover meal from the days of old, (I Cor. 5:7). And like that ancient meal which foreshadowed Christ to come, the Lord's Supper is not a meal which is served to all people. Rather, it is a supper which is served only to the members of God's covenant people.

“And the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, ‘This is the statute of the Passover:

***No foreigner shall eat of it...All the congregation of Israel shall keep it. If a stranger shall sojourn with you and would keep the Passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised. Then he may come near and keep it; he shall be as a native of the land. But no uncircumcised person shall eat of it,**” (Ex. 12:43, 47-48).*

Notice three critical truths from these verses:

1. There is a distinct “congregation” of God's people, and “all” the members of that covenant community are the only people who are welcome to eat of this sacred meal.
2. While only the members of God's people are welcomed to eat this meal, all kinds of people from all over the world (i.e. “strangers”) are invited to become members, and thereby, join in this meal. This is what the text means when it says, “*If a stranger...would keep the Passover...let all his males be circumcised. Then he may...keep it.*”

We must understand that “circumcision”, like baptism today, was the sign of membership in the covenant community. This truth is taught to us in Genesis 17:11-14 where God says to Abraham as the leader of his Church on earth,

*“You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you...Every male throughout your generations...shall surely be circumcised...**Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.**”*

3. Finally, the text unequivocally teaches us that anyone who is not a member of God's covenant people (i.e. “uncircumcised”), is not welcome to participate in this sacred meal.

Beloved, these truths form the foundation of what it means to faithfully administer the Lord's Supper today. As pastors, we are responsible to God to serve *his* Supper in *his* way to *his* people. Although the culture in which we live may call such practices "*out of touch*", "*old fashioned*", "*narrow*", "*unloving*", or all the like, "*we must obey God rather than men,*" (Acts 5:29). Out of love for God and our fellow man, we must endeavor to teach and preach only that which accords with the truth, (Jn. 17:17).

Three Important Questions

One of the reasons there is much confusion about the Lord's Supper is because, like many other theological subjects, these truths are not taught to us by *a single chapter and verse*. But there is also no single chapter or verse that teaches us a proper understanding of the holy *Trinity*. Nor is there is a single chapter and verse which teaches us all that we need to know concerning the critical relationship between *justification* and *sanctification*. In many things, our infinitely wise God has woven the truth into the whole of the Bible by both precept and principle. And it is the duty of the Church, by the help of the Holy Spirit, to humbly study, interpret, and apply all that God has given to us for our progress and joy in Christ, (Acts 17:11).

In what follows, I do not intend to provide a treatise which will thoroughly delve into all of the important facets of the Lord's Supper. Instead, I seek to raise a simple question, to answer that question, and then to explain the answer more fully and practically as it applies to my own conscience and practice as a pastor. In particular, I seek to help the beloved congregation which God has called me to serve, to better understand why we invite only those who are "***members in good-standing of any evangelical church***" to come forward to receive the body and blood of Christ during holy Communion. We have already seen a few highly important foundational principles in Exodus 12. We need to keep those in mind. But as we continue to probe forward, I want to take a slightly different approach to answering the big question on all of our minds:

1. Who is to be welcomed to the Lord's Supper?

Let every heart boldly answer: *All who have a credible profession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ!*

Yes and amen! Let every true believer in all the world come and eat of the Bread of Life and drink of the Well that shall never run dry. As the blessed children of God, all such persons have a divinely-given right unto this heavenly privilege.

2. But we must ask: What is "*a credible profession of faith*"?

For the Scripture declares that "*there are many who are insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers,*" (Tit. 1:10). And again in the same paragraph we are told that there are many who *profess one thing* but *practice another*. For the Scripture says, "*They*"—that is the "*many*" spoken of above—"*profess to know God, but they deny him by their works,*" (Tit. 1:16).

Thus, "*a credible profession of faith*" is evidenced not only in *lip* but also in the *life*, (Matt 3:9-10).

3. So what does it mean for a profession of faith to be evidenced in the *life*?

According to Holy Scripture it means at least these four things:

1. By the sovereign grace of the Holy Spirit, you have been led to repentance from sin and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as your only hope of salvation, (Acts 2:37-38; Jn. 1:12-13).
2. As a professing believer, you have obediently received the sacrament of Baptism, and thereby, become a member of the congregation of a local church, (Acts 2:38; Matt. 28:19). For just as circumcision was a sign of membership in the covenant community of old, so baptism (which has replaced circumcision) is the sign of membership in the covenant community today, (I Cor. 12:13; Acts 2:38-39; Matt. 28:19). Anyone who refuses church membership, should not be baptized because the two are inseparable in the sight of God, (Gen. 17:14; I Cor. 12:13; Luke 6:46).
3. As a member of a local church, you are in fellowship with other believers (Heb. 10:24-25), and submitted under the leadership of local shepherds who have been ordained by your Savior to keep watch over your soul, (Heb. 13:17; I Thess. 5:12-13; I Pet. 5:1-4).
4. By the help of the Holy Spirit, you are striving by faith to conform your life to the will of God as revealed in Scripture and walking in repentance wherever your beliefs or behavior are in conflict with God's Word, (Matt. 7:20; Eph. 4:1-6, 17-24; Col. 3; Rom. 12; I Thess. 4:3; II Tim. 2:19).

In other words, to have "*a credible profession of faith*" in both *lip* and *life*, by the definition of God's holy Word, means that you are "***a member in good-standing of any evangelical church.***"

Let's consider the meaning of these words more closely:

- ***"A member..."***
Being "*a member*" means that you have been baptized and received into the congregation of a local church by a credible profession of faith. It also means that since your baptism, *you have maintained that membership* by not leaving the congregation of a local church. For various reasons, you may have *transferred your membership*, but you have not *forsaken your membership*.
- ***"...in good-standing..."***
Being "*in good standing*" means that you are presently walking in repentance, pursuing godliness, and not under church discipline.
- ***"...of any evangelical church."***
"*Of any evangelical church*" means that all of the above is taking place within *a true church*, that is to say, a church that preaches the true biblical gospel.

Beloved, to be anything less than this is to *profess faith with the lips* but *not with the life*. It is to do exactly what Paul condemns in Titus 1:16 saying: "*They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works.*"

Two Dangers To Avoid

There are two great dangers which we must seek to avoid, as best as we are able, in our participation in the Lord's Supper. One is a danger to be avoided by *those who come forward to receive* this holy supper, (I Cor. 11:27). The other is a danger to be avoided by *those whom God has entrusted to administer* it—and who will have to give an account to God for their handling of it, (Heb. 13:17).

1. A Danger For Those Who Receive the Lord's Supper

First, those who come forward to receive the Lord's Supper must be careful that they are not a living example of Jesus' words in Matthew 7:21, "*Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.*" What is the warning here? It is a warning that *a profession of faith* which exists *only in lip* but *not in the life*, is a profession of faith which cannot be considered *credible*. It is a warning that true faith is evidenced not only by *a verbal affirmation of Christ*, but also by *obediently conforming to those actions which King Jesus has decreed for his people*, (Lk. 6:46).

According to the Great Commission and the testimony of the Apostles in Acts 2:37-38, these *actions*, of which true believers partake, include being baptized into the membership of the local church, (I Cor. 12:13). And that membership is to be maintained throughout the whole life of the believer. For various reasons, a time may come when you *transfer your membership* to another local church, but you are never to leave the church of your Lord and Savior. To sever yourself from the membership of the local church is, symbolically, *to sever yourself from Christ*; for the Church is his body, (Eph. 1:23).

Let's consider this from another angle. When a person is "*excommunicated*" due to the necessary process of church discipline, that person is being *removed from the membership of the local church*, (I Cor. 5:12-13). To use the language of Genesis 17:14, they are being "*cut off from [God's] people.*" To use the even harder language of I Corinthians 5:5, such persons are being "*delivered over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that their spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.*" Such an action, when carried out properly, is designed by God to lovingly communicate to that person that:

*Just as you are being visibly separated from the membership of the local church,
so, by this judgment, you are considered to be spiritually separated from the salvation that is in Christ Jesus.*

These *visible* and *temporal* actions are God's appointed means of communicating *spiritual* and *eternal* truth. It is a way of showing the souls of the unrepentant that they have no grounds to be assured of their salvation, but rather stand in great need of salvation. The hope of such difficult actions is that they will one day be welcomed *back into the congregation of God's people as members*, and thereby, re-affirmed in their standing before God as one of his beloved and redeemed children.

Perhaps you are wondering why this subject of *excommunication* is of any importance to the topic at hand? Well, strangely, when people *remove themselves from church membership voluntarily*, they somehow do not realize that, in effect, they are *excommunicating themselves*. Like Lot, they are choosing to "*pitch [their] tents toward Sodom*" and separate themselves from the visible body of Christ on earth, (Gen. 13:12). And thereby, though they may not have the wherewithal to recognize it, they have placed themselves into a *questionable position* and are communicating by their actions that *they too may yet stand in need of salvation*. This is exactly what the Scriptures say of those who depart from the membership of the local church:

"They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us," (1 Jn. 2:19).

These are difficult truths for a time such as ours, when *radical individualism* has wreaked so much havoc upon the people of God. There has never been a time in the history of God's people when so much confusion has prevailed about the importance of being *distinctly* and *sacredly* united to the local body of Christ. But being that the things we have seen from God's Word are true, even if unpopular, they must be properly taught and upheld by those who call themselves servants of the living God. And this leads us to the second danger.

2. A Danger For Those Who Administer the Lord's Supper

Secondly, those who administer the Lord's Supper as servants and representatives of the Lord Jesus Christ, must be careful that they are not *false prophets*. In the days of old, as God's righteous judgment against sinners approached, the *false prophets* were guilty of crying out to the people, "*Peace! Peace! All is well! You have nothing to fear! God is for you and will deliver you!*" Now, surely this is a good message to send to those for whom it is true! As pastors, we cherish the privilege to herald this message for the people of God because of what Jesus has done for us! But to send this message to those who are standing in an *insecure place before God* and remain *liable to his righteous judgment*, would be a great evil, (Jer. 6:14; 14:14; Deut. 18:20; Ezek. 13:9). It would be akin to knowing that someone was in harm's way and facing imminent danger, but refusing to tell them for fear of upsetting them and incurring their disapproval. Such a person is not *a lover of his neighbor* but rather *a lover of himself*, (Lk. 6:26). He is more concerned with being approved of by men than in doing what is in the true best interest of others.

We must understand that the Lord's Supper is *a confirming ordinance*. It is a sacrament for the Christian which is meant to give them *assurance of their standing with the Lord*; to remind them that what Jesus Christ did in his life, death, and resurrection, was done for *them*. Therefore, when a pastor is issuing an invitation to the Lord's Supper, he is telling those whom he invites, that, according to the Word of God, if they meet the description of his invitation, they have every reason to be confident in their personal salvation. And, therefore, if he is an *honest, God-fearing, neighbor-loving man*, he knows in his soul that he cannot offer a *loose invitation* to such a sacred meal. Why? Because he is not a *false prophet*; he knows that he cannot cry, "*Peace! Peace!*" to every person who happened to show up to church that Sunday. He cannot cry, "*All is well! You are forgiven!*" merely because someone showed up to church and professed with their *lips* that they are a Christian. Consider the Word of God's warning which was given to Ezekiel:

"Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die,' and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, in order to save his life, that wicked person shall die for his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked, and he does not turn from his wickedness, or from his wicked way, he shall die for his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul," (Ezek. 3:17-19).

When the pastor makes the invitation, no matter how hard it may be to be disliked by others, he must offer only the truth. He must offer the invitation to those whose *profession of faith is confirmed as credible according to the teaching of the Word of God*—and not according to the *private feelings* and *opinions* of men. He must offer the invitation only to those whose *profession of faith is evidenced in both lip and life*. And as it turns out, one rather simple and succinct way of articulating this kind of biblically-true invitation, is to say that the pastor must only offer the Lord's Supper to those who are:

"Members in good-standing of any evangelical church."

By this *exclusive invitation* he is not aiming in any way to *harshly condemn* those for whom this description is not (yet) true. Nor is he intending to say that he does not believe that those who profess faith but have not yet joined the membership of a local church are *definitely not true Christians*. By no means! Instead, because of his accountability to the Lord, and his desire to love his neighbor in truth, he is simply saying that because of their present standing, he is not able to extend *God's confirmation of their salvation*—even though he longs for the day to come when he can!

“Come, Everyone Who Thirsts, Come To the Waters!”

Let me be very clear that pastors take no pleasure in excluding some persons from participation the body and blood of Jesus Christ. They are pastors precisely because they love the Lord and desire to see all men come to a saving knowledge of the truth, (Ezek. 18:32; I Tim. 2:4). They long for the day when you and your family are coming forward to the Table of the Lord and being assured of your everlasting salvation in Christ! They hold membership classes with regular frequency and talk often about how important it is for those who *profess faith in Christ with their lips* to likewise *profess their faith in Christ with their life* by joining the membership of a local church. They will go out of their way to answer your questions as best as they can and to help you come to understand the things of God more fully, (Acts 18:26).

But when all this is being done for you, and yet, for whatever reasons, you continue to refuse to join the local church as a member, can it truly be said that the Elders of that church have been *narrow* and *harsh* toward you? Can it be accurately portrayed that *they have kept you away* from the Table of the Lord? Or is it, in fact, proper to say that *you yourself have chosen to stand at a distance from the body of Christ into which you have been heartily and warmly invited by them?*

The biggest question here is not, “*Who is to be welcomed to the Lord’s Supper?*” But rather: ***Why, O beloved professing Christian, are you refusing the wisdom of your Savior by refusing to unite as a member of his beloved Church?*** Why would you “*cut yourself off*” from the good things God has provided for you? Find a faithful local church and unite yourself to her as soon as possible! For this is right, *and good, and desirable, and biblical, and that which accords with a credible profession of faith in Christ.* As the Scripture says in Exodus 12:48, “***Then*** *he may come near...*” and eat this sacred meal—a holy feast which calls God’s people to *remember* the work of *the Greater Lamb* who takes away the sin of the world, (Jn. 1:29).

*“Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;
and he who has no money, come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?
Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.
Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live.”*

Isaiah 55:1-3