

## THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE CHURCH IN THE SACRAMENT OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

Each denomination and each individual must face the question of this responsibility to understand properly the true meaning of the sacrament and the responsibility of the church to administer the Lord's Supper in accordance with the teaching of the Scriptures.

First, we need to understand the difference between the visible and the invisible church. The invisible church is, as its name implies, not seen in its entirety. All whom the Lord has redeemed or will yet redeem, in all ages, form the body of the invisible church. Some, now living, may be members of the invisible church who are not members of the visible church. Others, who to all appearances, may seem to be members of this invisible church, may not be. Only God knows the membership of this invisible church. He alone knows the hearts of man and is able to discern their thoughts and intents.

The visible church, on the other hand, is composed of those who have professed their faith in Christ and are members of some branch of the Christian group. Some

are undoubtedly members of this invisible church who are not members of the visible church, while others, members of the visible church, will be cast out in the day of judgment. Christ, the righteous Judge, will say to them, "I never knew you."

Some have tried to limit membership in the visible church to those who are definitely known to be members of the invisible church. Any such effort is futile, because God only can judge the heart.

Since we cannot determine those who are members of the invisible church, there must be a basis for accepting members into the visible church. The basis upon which members are accepted into the visible church is that of a credible profession. In order for a profession of faith to be credible or believable, it must have an adequate content and must not be contradicted by the person's life.

The content of a person's profession must show that he knows enough about the Bible, the way of salvation, and the church to be an intelligent Christian, who understands what it means to be a Christian. The person's life must not contradict what he professes to believe. In speaking of the observance of the Lord's Supper, the Word declares, "But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is

called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one, no, not to eat". ( I Cor. 5:11) Such sinners were not allowed to partake of the sacrament.

The members of the visible church are associated into churches and denominations with different types of government. The Presbyterian form of church government is not essential to the existence of a church. However, the church must have government with responsible leaders to enforce discipline, oversee the church, feed the flock, protect from spiritual wolves and silence false teachers. As Paul commanded the elders of the church of Miletus, "And from Miletus, he sent to Ephesus, and called the elders of the church.....Take heed, therefore, unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God which He hath purchased with His own blood. For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears." Acts 20: 17, 28-31.

In summarizing, we might say that the visible church composed of professing Christians was set up by God through the apostles in the Presbyterian form with elders ordained to oversee the church, feed the flock, protect from wolves and silence false doctrines.

Our second consideration is the nature of the Lord's Supper. Just what are we doing when we partake of the Lord's Supper?

First, the Lord's Supper is by nature a communing or a joint participation with Christ and with one another. It is not an individual affair but a joint participation. "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we being many are one bread, and one body; for we are all partakers of that one bread." (I Cor. 10:16,17)

Second, the Lord's Supper is a commemorating. "When He had given thanks, He brake it, and said, Take, eat: this is My body which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of Me." (I Cor. 11:24) It is not just a memorial service, but involves calling to mind all we know and have experienced of the grace of Christ.

Third, the Lord's Supper is a covenanting.

"After the same manner also, He took the cup, when He had supped, saying, This cup is the new testament in My blood." (I Cor. 11:25) "Likewise also the cup after supper, saying, This cup is the new testament in My blood, which is shed for you." (Luke 22:20) This new Testament or Covenant is God's sovereign offer of eternal life through the blood of Jesus. Men ratify this covenant when they partake of the Lord's Supper. In the joint action of communion they are also ratifying the system of faith, government and worship under which the sacraments are administered.

Fourth, the Lord's Supper is also a sealing or confirming. It is a sign and seal of that which God has done in the heart of the Christian. It is also a sign of the truth that the believer is feeding on Christ. Thus it is an outward means of communicating the benefits of redemption.

Fifth, the Lord's Supper is by nature a witnessing and confessing. "For as often as ye eat this bread and drink this cup, ye do show the Lord's death till He come." (I Cor. 11:26) The Communicants, in observing the Lord's Supper, are confessing in unison their faith in the whole Word of God as it is centered in and confirmed by the death of Jesus Christ. This confession is proclaimed from the platform of the church,

which is the pillar and ground of truth.

So, then, we see that the Lord's Supper is, by its very nature, a communing, a commemorating, a covenanting, a confirming and a confessing by the congregations of the church as a united body.

With these basic conceptions of the nature of the church and of the Lord's Supper in our mind, we are ready to proceed to our third major consideration—the basis for Close Communion.

The Bible clearly teaches that the church is responsible for those who partake of the Lord's Supper. One outstanding case is recorded in the fifth chapter of First Corinthians. That chapter begins, "It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife. And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you." Paul is here upbraiding the congregation in Corinth because they have allowed a violator of the Seventh Commandment to remain in the fellowship of the church, without showing any repentance for his sin.

In verses 8 and 9 of the same chapter, Paul stresses the need for purity: "Therefore, let us keep the feast, not with the old

leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators." And in verse 11, he adds, "But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one, no, not to eat." In this verse, God speaking through Paul, makes it clear that a violator of the commandments is not to be allowed to have fellowship with the other members of the congregation in partaking of the Lord's Supper.

Since the church is responsible for excluding violators of the commandments from the Lord's table, then it becomes necessary for the church to determine what constitutes a violation. Individuals should examine themselves, and repent of their sins, but, if they do not, then the church must act. "For if we should judge ourselves, we should not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world." (I Cor. 11:31,32) The result of this discipline, as this points out, is that the violator should repent of his sin, and be brought back into the full fellowship of the church. This is exactly what happened to the sinner described in this fifth chapter

of First Corinthians. That happy result is related in the second chapter of Second Corinthians.

Now we must consider for a few moments what constitutes a violation of the Commandments. Our nation is violating the First Commandment in deliberately rejecting the Lord Jesus Christ as the nation's King and Head. "Thou shalt have no other gods before Me." Yet our nation sets the will of the people as supreme. A person who participates in this sin of our nation is also guilty of a violation of the first commandment and should not be allowed the privilege of partaking of the Lord's Supper until he has repented of this sin.

The second commandment forbids the using of graven images in God's worship. But as the Westminster Larger Catechism, Question 109, says, it forbids "All devising, counselling, commanding, using, and anywise approving, any religious worship not instituted by God Himself". The use of uninspired hymns and instrumental music were not instituted by God for the New Testament church. Therefore these are a violation of the second commandment. Violators of this commandment should be asked to repent before they come to the Lord's Table.

The third commandment is, "Thou shalt

not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain." Sinful oaths and vows such as those taken when an individual joins a secret order are a violation of this third commandment. Violators of this commandment should be asked to repent of their sin before they come to the table of the Lord.

When one stops to consider these facts—that the church is responsible for those who partake of the Lord's Supper; that unrepentant violators of the commandments are not to partake of the Lord's Supper; that these sins just mentioned are actually violations of God's commandments, then we must conclude that the only adequate method of fulfilling our responsibility as a church is by the practice of Close Communion, and the exercise of discipline among our own members.

In conclusion, I would like to quote a portion from a booklet entitled, "Concerning Close Communion" written by the late Dr. W. J. McKnight. He entitled this section, "A Case in Point".

"An incident that happened a few years ago in my ministry might be cited in this connection, it seems to me, as an apt illustration. One of the ablest men I ever knew—the pastor of a neighboring congregation—accosted me on the street one day and said, 'One thing about your church I

could never understand is your position on Close Communion.' In reply I said, 'In point of principle our views on that question are the same as yours.' 'How is that?', he asked. 'Suppose', said I, 'that one of your members should strike a child down with an axe and kill it, would your Session allow him to go to the Lord's table at the next communion?' 'Well', said he, 'I should hope not'. 'Why?', I asked. 'Why, because he violated the Sixth Commandment', he replied. 'But', I protested, 'he might hold that what he did was not murder.' 'Oh', said my friend, 'we would not leave that to him; we would take that matter into our own hands.' 'You mean to say', I said, 'that your Session would assume the responsibility of interpreting the Sixth Commandment, and also of passing judgment on the man's conduct thus interpreted.' 'Precisely', he said. 'Well, then', said I, 'why should you object to our Sessions when they do the same thing with respect to the First Commandment, and the Second, and the Third?' 'Oh, I see', he answered, 'and what is more, I believe you are right; it never occurred to me in that light; with you Close Communion means that the Reformed Presbyterian Church intends to honor the Moral Law as the Church apprehends it, before anyone shall be permitted to take a seat at the Lord's table under its jurisdiction and

oversight.' 'Yes', said I, 'that is the exact situation as we see it!' And the man was satisfied.

"After all, to a person who really stops to consider, it is only a question of clear thinking and a sincere purpose to follow orders."

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