

Close Communion

Who Should Be Invited to Take Part in the Lord's Supper

Acts 2:42. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship and in breaking of bread and in prayers.

To the question, Who should be invited to take part in the Communion of the Lord's Supper? three different answers have been given. One answer is that every one should be invited who is willing to accept an invitation in Christ's name. Another is that all who are believed to be in good standing in any evangelical church should be invited to partake. The third answer is that every communicant should be a member in good standing of the church that is conducting the communion service. The first of these positions is usually called open; the second, restricted, and the third, close communion.

The expression, "breaking of bread", in our text, is regarded by some as referring to the ordinary everyday meals of the disciples, but we take it that the phrase has special reference to the communion of the Lord's Supper. The first reason for this conclusion is that the everyday meals of the disciples are referred to four verses later in this chapter and there is

no reason for a double reference. A second reason is in the connection in which it is found between the apostles' fellowship and prayers. Ordinary eating is not in itself a devotional act, while the Lord's Supper is, and therefore accords fittingly with doctrine, fellowship and prayers. A third reason is that the revised version puts "the" before "breaking of bread," making it a definite act like the Supper. A fourth reason is that it is not a matter of the special operation of the Holy Spirit, or of special devotion, that disciples should continue steadfastly in ordinary eating.

This text is an explicit statement of the apostolic practice with regard to the question before us. Those who took part with them in "the breaking of bread" were those who "continued steadfastly in the apostles' teaching and fellowship". From this we draw the conclusion that had any one not "continued steadfastly in the apostles' teaching and fellowship," he would not have been invited to take part with them in "the breaking of bread". From this text, therefore, we deduce the following doctrine which we take as our theme:

**A CHURCH SHOULD INVITE TO THE
LORD'S SUPPER THOSE ONLY WHO
CONTINUE STEADFASTLY IN HER
TEACHING AND FELLOWSHIP**

The principles of the Reformed Presbyterian Church on this subject of communion are in harmony with the apostolic practice set forth

in this text. This church declares it to be an error "that it is lawful for the church to be without any terms of Christian communion," Declaration and Testimony, page 212. This statement condemns the practice of inviting everyone to come to the Lord's table without any condition whatever. She also declares it to be an error "that any person may be admitted to communion who opposes any of the terms of church fellowship," that is, one who opposes any doctrine held and professed by the church; and again that it is an error "that occasional communion may be extended to persons who should not be received to constant fellowship," a requirement which bases communion on continued fellowship. She holds therefore that those who continue steadfastly in the doctrine and fellowship of a church, and those only, should be invited to partake of the Lord's Supper.

The practice of inviting to the Lord's Supper those only who continue steadfastly in the doctrine and fellowship of the church conducting the communion is one upon which the world visits a great reproach, yet the position is not on that ground to be condemned by Christians. If it were a question of common morality with regard to which worldly persons as well as Christians have to decide, the judgment of the world would have weight; but when it is a question as to where the dividing line should be drawn between those who testify against the world and those who in some measure yield

to the world, we have reason to conclude that the decision of the world will be wrong. Questions of church polity the world constantly and consistently decides in favor of those nearest to itself. The testimony of consistent Christians is one great means of overcoming the world and the world naturally hates that which wounds its pride and selfishness, therefore it is not willing that any testimony be borne against itself, or against those who adhere to any of its sinful practices. For this reason the world hates what is called close communion and approves of unrestricted communion, which bears no testimony against anything, and which gives the church's highest privileges to anyone who chooses to accept the invitation.

That the doctrine which we have deduced from our text and which the Reformed Presbyterian Church has adopted in her standards is both reasonable and Scriptural will appear from the following considerations:

1. The terms of communion in a church should be the same for all.

When each of us joined the Reformed Presbyterian Church and gained the right to come to the Lord's table, we accepted the Bible as the Word of God and the only rule of faith and practice, we accepted the Confession of Faith and the Catechisms as founded on this Word, we acknowledged the divine right of Presbyterianism taught in this Word, we promised to hold to a pure worship drawn from this Word

and to adhere to our covenant vows, if need be, with a martyr spirit. We pledged ourselves against strong drink, against secret societies, against a Christian Constitution of civil government, and against sinful amusements, promising a due subordination in the Lord to the authority of the Church in seeking a life of godliness. This is what we have required of ourselves and we are persuaded that it is not too much; it surely cannot be considered unjust or unequal that the same should be required of all. If we ask less of others, we certainly must have asked too much of ourselves.

The Lord's Supper in the present dispensation takes the place of the Passover in the Old, and the law of God with regard to those who should take part in the Passover will throw light on this question of communion. This rule is laid down in Ex. 12:48-9. The stranger who wished to partake of the Passover was required to accept of the covenant of Israel in its sign and seal of circumcision before he could commune with the people of Israel. The principle that governed this requirement is found clearly laid down and it is the one we are here considering: "One law shall be to him that is homeborn, and to the stranger that sojourneth among you." The terms of communion in Israel were the same for all, and these were also the conditions of membership.

This story is told of a minister's visit to a home where there were children. At dinner the children ate plain victuals in the kitchen,

while the food that their soul desired was carried past them to the visitor in the dining room. After dinner the minister, who was a good man and loved children, sought their company, and began asking them what they wished to be when they grew to be men and women. Each one named his choice and one bright little fellow declared stoutly that he intended to be a visitor. "And why," said the preacher. "Because," said the boy, "a visitor don't have to work any and he gets the best things to eat." We keep back our children from the Lord's Supper until they have read and in some fair measure have understood and have accepted our conditions of church membership. Shall we invite our friends and neighbors to the communion without asking of them what we have required of our children? If we keep back our children until they have fulfilled these requirements and invite visitors to partake of our highest privilege without requiring them to accept our terms of communion, or face the duties of our faith, it would seem better to be a visitor.

The rule of justice and equality, the rule of common sense, is to admit all on the same terms; nor can it be deemed discourteous among sensible people to have one rule for all; indeed fair-minded people do not desire to take advantage of unfair privileges. One rule for all is a position that would seem to need little defence.

2. The conditions of communion in a church should be the same as the conditions of membership.

This, as we have seen, was the rule in the Old Testament dispensation. Accepting the covenant with its sign of circumcision was the condition both of membership and of communion according to the law given by Moses. Our text leads us to believe that the same principle obtained in the apostolic church. Those who were baptized and who "continued steadfastly in the apostles' teaching and fellowship" were members of the New Testament church and were admitted to "the breaking of bread". There is no hint in either dispensation that the terms of membership and the terms of communion were different. As a church cannot admit to her membership any but those who continue steadfastly in her doctrine and fellowship, so she should invite to the Lord's Supper those who do the same.

That the conditions of communion in a church should be the same as the conditions of membership is a principle practically adopted by all churches. We find, for example, that in the Protestant Episcopal Church, where the most liberal rule prevails, anyone who thinks himself a Christian and desires to partake of the Lord's Supper may do so and at the same time we find that anyone who thinks himself a Christian and desires to enter into the membership of that church may become a member. The conditions of communion and of

prohibition. It means that we will stand for him against the empire of secrecy that opposes his kingdom of light, that we stand for him against a Christless Constitution and the politics that will have no king but Caesar, that we will stand for a pure worship by using the inspired "psalms, and hymns and spiritual songs," offering him the fruit of our lips without the sense-pleasing inventions of men. It means these and many more issues now pressing upon Christ's cause and church. When we sit down solemnly to ratify this covenant and gain strength to keep it, why should one be invited to a seat who thinks that loyalty to Christ is not required in these matters and who is indifferent to any one or to many of them? As soon as we deliberately admit one who does not ratify this covenant of loyalty, what will the covenant, or its ratification, mean to us? When we lower the conditions for others, we lower its meaning for ourselves.

4. **Unity of belief in all important doctrines is the basis of real communion.**

The communion of the apostles and the disciples who fellowshiped with them was real because they continued steadfastly in the apostles' teaching. People may agree to differ, but they cannot have communion on their differences. The more we hold in common, the higher and more complete is our communion; the less we hold in common, the lower and less complete is our communion. If we all have the mind of Christ, we shall have close

communion with one another in him. But if we bring in those who in important matters do not agree with one another as to where the Lord Jesus stands on issues of present moment, from that very intrusion of different beliefs the communion loses its completeness. Set the table round with men who drink and with those who are total abstainers, with license voters and with believers in prohibition, with Masons and with opponents of secret Baal worship, with those who swear to the Constitution and with those who believe it a sin to swear to carry on government according to a law that leaves out King Jesus, with those who sing uninspired hymns and those who hold to the hymns of inspiration, with those who wish a concert Sabbath morning with choir and instruments and those who believe in congregational singing, with those who believe that Christ died in the place of sinners and those who think that he died as an example only; what kind of a communion would we have? It might be a communion in form, but it would look more like a profanation of the sacrament. They could commune only in what they held in common and that would bring their communion down to the level of the one who knew and believed the least. This surrendering of the higher to the lower appears to be the logical and, if time be given, the inevitable result of inviting to the Lord's Supper those who do not believe, much less continue in, the doctrine taught by the church. It does not seem a desirable end. We would rather level up than

level down. We would rather commune in our wealth than in our poverty of truth.

5. The Lord's Supper is a social ordinance in which the partakers commune with one another as well as with Christ.

In our text we find communion associated not only with doctrine or teaching but with fellowship. The feast of the Lord's Supper is essentially social. The command, "This do in remembrance of me," was given not to an individual but to a company. A man could not properly observe this sacrament alone. In the old dispensation the Passover was to be eaten by families; in the new, the Lord's Supper, by congregations. "For we being many are one bread and one body; for we are all partakers of that one bread." Christ ate with the eleven and the apostles with those who continued steadfastly in their fellowship.

On the contrary, the underlying principle of open communion is that each man may hold his own communion with Christ, regardless of any intimate relation with those who commune at the same time. The popular and plausible argument we often hear is based on this idea. "Is not this the Lord's table? Does not this man profess to be the Lord's? Then no matter what he believes or fails to believe, no matter what he does or fails to do, why not invite him to come?" This is the world's argument, in an age of individualism. It assumes that those who partake are not one body but

a collection of individuals, each independent of the other.

The Reformed Presbyterian Church all through her history has been a standing protest against individualism. She has always believed in the King to whom all should submit and therefore has believed in his kingdom. She holds fast to all proper relationships and believes that they should be observed in loyalty to Christ who constituted them, and while she maintains these principles, she can never adopt a theory of the communion which regards as separate and independent individuals those who commune with one another as well as with Christ. We are to commune on both tables of the law, on love to man as well as love to God.

6. The discipline of the church can be maintained only by making the conditions of communion the same as the conditions of membership.

It is not difficult to maintain discipline as long as those who have broken church law are willing to submit to censure, but when an offender will not submit, then there is no alternative but to suspend him from his privileges in the church. But, unless his offence be so bad as to offend the moral sense of an ungodly world, he can readily find a home in some church which has a standard low enough to admit him, for some churches come close to the world. Then where open communion prevails, or even where members in good stand-

ing in other churches are invited to commune, he can return and enjoy the highest privilege of the church which has just suspended him from its privileges.

It may be said that a suspended man would not care to do this. But even if the one suspended did not come back as a member of another church to enjoy the privileges from which he had been suspended, the members of other churches living in the habitual practice of the offence for which he was suspended will be welcome. What then is the use or effect of discipline? Men will feel that they have a right to resent discipline as a personal attack, if others doing just what they are charged with are permitted to commune without hindrance. Discipline is not likely in such a case to have any blessed effect.

But what, it may be asked, shall we say of the discipline of those churches that do not practice close communion? It may truthfully be answered that in so far as they have invited to the Lord's Supper those who do not continue steadfastly in their doctrine and fellowship, their discipline has disappeared. Those who favor inviting to the Lord's Supper persons who do not hold to the church's doctrine and fellowship cannot, if they be logical, favor discipline and as a rule they do not, unless they have a personal end to gain. But one who believes that a church should invite to the Lord's Supper those only who continue steadfastly in her doctrine and fellowship has

ground to stand on when he calls for discipline upon those who have broken the law of the church.

7. The church vitiates her testimony, if she admits to the Lord's Supper those who do not continue steadfastly in her doctrine and fellowship.

If a church testifies against some flagrant sin and then invites to the communion table those who are known to be guilty of that sin, her testimony on that subject will not amount to much. Such testimony is not taken seriously by the world. But, if in addition to her testimony she says, "Since you do not continue in our doctrine on this subject, and since you are guilty of this sin, we cannot invite you to sit with us at the Lord's table," then her testimony counts for something. The church that testifies against the liquor traffic and at the same time admits saloon keepers to the communion, is not bearing a very effective testimony.

The church furnishes a good test of the importance which she attaches to any truth by the penalty which she visits upon those who do not, or will not, recognize and accept it. She will not deny that they are Christians, but will deny to all who do not accept her testimony the highest privileges in her gift. She will note that man who does not with some measure of fulness accept her doctrine and fellowship, and will have no [church] company

with him that he may be ashamed. Yet will she not count such a Christian an enemy, but will admonish him as a brother.

Every school finds it necessary to draw some line that will let a backward scholar know that he has not yet learned his lesson and that a higher standing may be attained. This is done in no spirit of enmity to the one who has not learned, but in order to open his mind to the thought of higher attainments and of better things. A Christian who has not fully accepted Christ as King is either one who does not as yet know of Christ's claims, or one who knowing is unwilling to agree to them. In either case it is for the furtherance of truth and for the man's own good that he be held back from the highest privileges of the church of Christ until he is willing to give the Lord the place which belongs to him.

Our standards wisely mark as an error the idea that any person may be admitted to communion who opposes any of the terms of church fellowship. To admit such a person would go far to break down our testimony and to prove that we do not believe it of any material importance whether our testimony is accepted or not. All who continue steadfastly in our church's doctrine and fellowship will be welcome in her breaking of bread, but any who oppose her doctrines and do not seek her fellowship should not be invited to partake of sealing ordinances in the Lord's Supper.