

WHO SHOULD TAKE THE LORD'S SUPPER?

Friends from other backgrounds may be surprised at our practice concerning members-only at the Lord's table. I believe that a careful examination of the Scriptures will prove our position to be the biblical one. Please prayerfully consider the following paragraphs with an open mind.

1. The Lord's Supper is a church ordinance.

The Lord's Supper was ordered or ordained (hence "ordinance") by Christ for His assembly. Note the words to the Corinthian church describing their observance of the Lord's Supper: ...when ye come together in the church...when ye come together into one place...when ye come together to eat (1Cor. 11:18, 20, 33). It is not for families to gather and take the Supper. Nor is it a community ordinance, in which the whole town is invited. Nor is it a private, individual ordinance, observed in solitude. Rather, churches-gathered assemblies of Jesus Christ-alone have the authority to administer this Supper.

The same is true of the ordinance of baptism. Only the New Testament church has the authority to administer either of these ordinances. Inasmuch as it would be out of order for us to baptize a person who was not committing himself to our assembly, so it would be out of order for us to serve the Lord's Supper to one not already committed to our assembly.

Since the Supper is a church ordinance, the burden of proof falls on those who open the table to non-members.

2. The Lord's Supper is for baptized believers only.

Before a person takes the Lord's Supper, he should be baptized as a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. Our Lord made plain the order of these two ordinances in the Great Commission. We are to (1) make disciples, (2) baptize them and (3) teach them to observe all that Christ has commanded (see Mat. 28:19-20). This order was followed by the early church when those who received the word were baptized, and then continued steadfastly in the breaking of the bread (see Acts 2:41-42). Baptism is a one-time ordinance at the beginning of our Christian walk; the Lord's Supper is a repeated ordinance throughout our Christian walk. We have no right to invert the order of the ordinances given in the Scripture.

A key question then arises, What constitutes baptism? According to the plain New Testament teaching, Christian baptism is the immersion of a believer, in water, as a public profession of his faith in Christ. Those who were sprinkled, whether as babies or as adults, cannot properly take the Lord's Supper, because they have never been truly baptized.

Furthermore, our church is responsible only for the baptism of our own members. We do not need even to bring up the question of baptism to our visitors, until they apply for membership. Only then do we have a duty to know if they have been baptized, and if so, when and by whom. That is, were they immersed as believers, and by a gospel-preaching church?

Since only baptized believers should partake of the Lord's Supper, and since we are responsible to inquire about the baptism of our own membership only, we must "fence" from the table all non-members.

3. The Lord's Supper is only for those who are in good standing in the local assembly.

Sadly, from time to time the need arises to remove erring members from membership. Those who commit offences and fail to repent must be removed and considered as unconverted (Mat. 18:17). The church at Corinth was told not to keep company with a person who, professing to be a brother in Christ, was a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner. The believers were not to eat with such a one, but to put him away (1Cor. 5:11-13). Those practicing sin, or unrepentant of sin, must not be allowed at the Lord's table. They are to be avoided and withdrawn from (see Rom. 6:17; 2Th. 3:6, 14; 1Tim. 6:5).

Each local church possesses this disciplinary authority over its members, and over its members only. Our church does not have oversight over the members of another church. Therefore we cannot invite to the Lord's Supper those over whom we do not exercise oversight, and over whom we have no authority to discipline from the table if the need arises.

Since our oversight extends only to our membership, we cannot bring non-members to partake of the Lord's Supper.

4. Church symbolism in the Lord's Supper is undermined by opening the table to non-members.

Certainly there are many purposes for the Lord's Supper: it shows the death of Christ (1Cor. 11:26); it pictures the believer's spiritual participation with Him (Jn. 6:53-56); it prompts us to careful self-examination (1Cor. 11:28); etc. But one area that should not be overlooked is the corporate purpose and benefit of the Supper. When the church at Corinth observed this ordinance, they were declaring their union and unity in Christ. 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 (1Cor. 10:16-17).

The one piece of bread from which all partake after it is broken, pictures among other things the one-ness of the group that eats it. Drinking from one cup pictures the same. Collectively, we are one with Christ. We have the most intimate communion (Gk. *koinonia*, literally fellowship, partnership) with each other in the things of Christ. This symbolism expresses the reality of mutual commitment that exists only in the bonds of membership in the local assembly.

The depiction of unity and intimacy in the Lord's Supper is diminished if non-members participate.

Let us summarize what we have seen:

- The table is under the authority of the local church.
- We cannot bring to the table those who are unbaptized.
- We cannot bring to the table those who have not submitted to our oversight.
- We cannot bring to the table those who are not functioning in our assembly.

Let us now answer some common objections:

Objection 1. “It is the Lord’s table, not man’s table. Any fencing from the table makes it to be man’s table.”

Answer. The table is undoubtedly the Lord’s. It is His Supper. Therefore, He has the right to bring to it whom He pleases. It is not we, but He who fences the table in the ways mentioned above. The objector would have the ordinance open to anyone physically present, which would include unbelievers, unbaptized, uncommitted, and those under the discipline of another church. Such a practice makes a mockery of the ordinance.

Some congregations invite to the ordinance anyone present whose conscience does not forbid him. Such a policy effectively makes the table everyone’s personal table, and not the Lord’s after all! However, the Savior does not leave it up to us to decide for ourselves. His command is, This do... Individuals have no choice but to comply with His command, fulfill the prerequisites He has given, maintain a clear conscience before God, and then observe the ordinance. Failure to do so is disobedience.

Objection 2. “The Lord’s Supper is supposed to show the unity of all Christians on the earth. Your policy tends to show the fragmentation of Christians. Aren’t we all one body and one church?”

Answer. Nowhere does the Bible teach that the purpose of the Supper is to show ecumenical unity or general goodwill toward everyone who names the Name of Christ. The truth is, the present manifestation of the body of Christ is the local assembly. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular (1Cor. 12:27). The church at Corinth was not merely one part of Christ’s worldwide body. Rather, the assembly at Corinth was itself Christ’s body; and the members of that church were each functioning as feet, ears, eyes, etc., in their interaction with one another. While we do not deny that all believers belong to the family and kingdom of God, we must affirm that the metaphor of a body with connected, functioning faculties only fits with the local church. The unity of the local assembly is what is declared (among other things) in the Supper, as expressed in #4 above.

Objection 3. “Didn’t Paul take the Lord’s Supper with many churches, wherever his travels took him?”

Answer. The case of Paul was unique. He was an apostle, a divinely chosen eye-witness of the resurrected Christ. He exercised apostolic authority over all the churches. He presumably could observe the Lord's Supper in any of those churches. However, no apostles exist today. (I believe a case could be made in our present time for a missionary participating in the Supper in the churches he is planting.)

Objection 4. "What about a member of a sister-church who may be passing through while traveling? Surely you would not deny him the Lord's Supper!"

Answer. This is perhaps the most difficult question. Some of our forefathers said that although no church was ever obligated to do so, under the proposed circumstances, as a courtesy, it should do so. However, several questions must be considered. First, how can we know that this person was not recently disciplined? Second, if we have reason to question the credibility of his profession, we are faced with a dilemma: do we violate our conscience, or do we alienate the visitor and his home church? Third, once we make the exception, where do we stop? For example, should we start inviting to the table those who are baptized believers who live in our locality, but who are not members of any church? After all, is it not rather awkward for us to invite to the table the traveler whom we see once a year, and yet to deny the table to one we see perhaps every week? The point is, once we start making exceptions, what is to keep the door from swinging wide open? Therefore, the safest policy is to restrict the Lord's Supper to members only.

In conclusion, we know that some beloved visitors will misunderstand. They will think us bigoted and cultish, or simply over-protective. Honestly, we like to be agreeable! We do not wish to offend anyone. Nevertheless, we would rather risk offending our fellow-creature than to offend our God. We simply cannot affront our Savior by carelessness with His solemn ordinance.

It is my desire that this debate over the participants in the Lord's Supper not overshadow the whole meaning of the ordinance. What a wonder is Calvary! What a redemption has been accomplished by the broken body and shed blood of the Lamb of God! May the reality represented by the symbols be exceeding precious in the heart of every reader of these lines!

If you wish to discuss membership or any of the issues mentioned herein, I welcome your inquiry.

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