

I. We begin with arguments that have their roots in communion as a local church ordinance

A. The path from membership to the table

Acts 2 raises the question of this study because those who enter the local church at Jerusalem by repentance-baptism come directly to the Table: **So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.**<sup>42</sup> **And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers** (Acts 2.41-42). Granted, the church is in its infancy and its structure is put in place gradually. Two examples: 1) the ordination of elders is not mentioned, but at some point they were appointed and thus they simply appear in the record of Acts, and 2) communion is closely associated with ordinary daily meals. We need the entire NT to learn about the qualifications of office holders, and to learn that there is no required frequency of observance for communion.

Thus, the Table is in view though things are rough and ready: it is the mention of “the act of breaking” that indicates the meal Jesus instituted (Bruce, *Acts*, 79: an otherwise trivial point that is significant as a sign of Christ’s body broken like bread for distribution). Here, the membership commitment of repentance-baptism is put before us: entering the church by turning away from the crooked generation is tied to repentance: **And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, "Save yourselves from this crooked generation"** (Acts 2.40), and repentance is tied to baptism: **And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins** (Acts 2.38). We have repentance-baptism-entry into the church: **those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls** (2.41). You save yourself, Peter says, by leaving the old church and entering the new church through baptism. People enter the church by repentance-baptism committing themselves **to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers** (Acts 2.42).

So, we ask, does not this text tell us that the proper path to the Table is by the membership commitment of repentance-baptism and that a membership commitment is required for partaking? Think of the context of these families meeting for dinner: would it not be clear to all that the breaking of bread is for those who received the word and entered the church? Who would they expect to participate in the special celebration of breaking bread? Those who say, “I believe,” but have not been baptized? Those who profess belief and were baptized without any commitment to the new Israel? It is reasonable to conclude that expected at the new Table are those who entered the church by saving themselves from the old church and entering the new. In other words, it does not make sense to separate commitment to the church from the commitment of repentance and baptism. Similarly, we should receive at the Table those who want to be under the authority of pastors in the church for instruction, and who do not hesitate regarding fellowship in the word and prayer.

B. Local church authority and its limits

Communion is not for any group of Christians to observe anywhere at anytime; it is for those who gather as a church (1 Cor 11.18, **when you come together as a church...it is...the Lord's supper that you eat**; something that was **not** the case in a faithful way for the Corinthians). Therefore, on one hand, as a local church ordinance, it is the local church that has the authority to administer the sacrament (no individual Christian and no group of Christians can simply decide that they have the right to administer communion). On the other hand, the local church must operate within the limits of its authority. How then can the local church administer the sacrament to people, even

professing Christians, not under its authority? So, one must be a member of a local church (under local church authority) to come to the Table properly.

Objection 1: if we admit members of other churches (open communion), we admit people not under our local authority?

Reply: in this case, we admit them in recognition of the authority of the church of which they are members. This goes with a sense of our bond with the churches throughout the world and with the brothers and sisters everywhere. We thus appreciate the universal church understanding that each local church is the universal church in a local setting.

Objection 2: people who have left a church would then be barred from the Table because they are not members of a local church, even though they are baptized believers. It may take them many communion Sundays to settle on a church. To bar them contradicts brotherhood showing that local church membership is not properly a requirement for communion.

Reply: this is an application of the membership rule that is too rigid and that lacks charity. We may consider them faithful local church members in a process of transition. As such, they had a solid membership commitment, their faithfulness is not in question (they are not under discipline and unrepentant), there is good communication with the new church they are evaluating for membership, and they state their intent to work through a process toward membership (somewhere in a reasonable timeframe). It is charitable to take these things as qualifying the rule of membership without eliminating but clarifying it.

Accordingly (because of church authority and its limits), it is the responsibility of the church to fence the Table by informing the consciences of those present that they ought not to partake unless they are members in good standing under the authority of a local church.

### C. Identifying (local) church members

This may be the most controversial but perhaps the most important church ordinance argument. We want to acknowledge the universal church of believers everywhere, but do we simply count someone a believer because he professes faith? Can we count someone a member of Christ's church if he is not a member of His visible local church, even if he professes to be a member of the universal church? Here is a weighty answer: to identify people as Christians, we need to know of their confession of faith, baptism, and membership in Christ's church (granted, these things can be merely outward and false). Of course, we are saved by faith alone, but true faith does not remain alone. We do not look into the heart, but we must judge the credibility of a confession with the mouth. This way of identifying Christians is based on the fact that the call to Christ is a call to discipleship. For support, you may think of texts like the following:

1) Matthew 28.19-20: in love for people, we must present the gospel as it is presented in Scripture in the promise to repentance-baptism-church membership which involves a commitment to the authority of a local church as a disciple. According to the Great Commission (Mat 28.19-20), what we look for in response to the gospel is the commitment of baptism which is a commitment to obey the gospel as disciples learning the teachings of Christ in His church under pastoral instruction. Pastors (in the footsteps of the apostles) are to look for people who will hear their word (Mat 10.14).

2) Matthew 11.28-30: We define a Christian not simply by profession of faith (come to me) but by discipleship (learn from me) under the authority of Christ (take my yoke: which now applies under His resurrection authority as Head of the church). Having forgiveness (rest of soul) is promised to the commitment of yourself to Christ as your prophet, priest, and head of the church. We look for people who submit themselves to Christ's church of which He is the Head.

3) Acts 11.25-26: Disciples are first called Christians at Antioch: For a whole year they [Barnabas and Saul] met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians. So, here is the hallmark of Christianity: Christians are disciples and members of a local church. In view in Acts 11 are Christian-disciple-local church members in normative Christianity.

Argument: therefore, we ought to fence the Table by calling for repentance-baptism-discipleship under the authority of Christ in His church. When we go down this road, this serious road, we do so for the good of those who hear the good news; we press the consciences of hearers to become disciples who learn the teachings of Christ from pastors (Mat 28.19-20). It is important to proclaim this commitment package because this is the way that Jesus saves the nations in a process of centuries until the end of the age. Surely, 1 Timothy 4.16b gives us this same sentiment: **Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.** <sup>14</sup>**Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you.** <sup>15</sup>**Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress.** <sup>16</sup>**Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.** Therefore, *Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus*: there is no salvation outside the church (Cyprian and the reformers). The Table is for those inside the church *in a credible way*.