

Entering membership in a local church by baptism anticipates participation in the other sacrament of communion, and participation in the other sacrament carries the covenant of baptism forward in the life of the church. In both sacraments, we commit to being disciples in Christ's church.<sup>1</sup> Embracing baptism is a commitment to discipleship under Christ who has all authority as head of the church (Mat 28.19-20), and communion is a commitment to discipleship by feeding on the one loaf in the context of church life and unity (1 Cor 10.16-17: **The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?**<sup>17</sup> **Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread**). So, in communion, we renew our covenant of baptism.

Therefore, if there is no commitment to discipleship in Christ's church, then partaking of communion involves renewal in symbol of a commitment that does not exist in reality.<sup>2</sup> Such covenant renewal is therefore false and contradicts the unity of the church signaled in both sacraments. We are then in the position of not being united with the church while speaking in symbol of the unity of the church. Hence, there is renewal of the covenant of membership without membership, and commitment to Christ and His church is misunderstood (and misrepresented) by a professing Christian in some core and concrete way. These facts require administrators to ask people who are not in covenant with a local church to delay partaking of the communion symbol of their public covenant to a local church until they make that public covenant a reality.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, the many inconsistencies that emerge here (of not speaking the truth, of violating good order, of obscuring the gospel, of not judging the body rightly, of professing unity without union, of incorrectly claiming to be a disciple in Christ's church in a concrete way without submission to an eldership you own for your instruction) can only be rectified by resolving the matter of public covenant with a local church.<sup>4</sup> The ultimate conclusion is that professing Christians who do not have a covenant relationship with a local church, ought to resolve this first before partaking.<sup>5</sup> Encouraging them in this direction by informing them of the membership requirement is for their benefit, it advances good order, clarifies and guards the gospel, promotes unity, and encourages discipleship.

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<sup>1</sup>Although subordinate to God's voice in the sacraments as gospel signs, Scripture indicates that our covenant word is a vital part of participation, cf. 1 Pet 3.21.

<sup>2</sup>For this commitment to have practical meaning it must be publicly communicated and include the pastor, the flock, and the prospective member in a mutual way.

<sup>3</sup>Again, some might question how this works with open communion since a visitor is not under obedience to the pastor of the church he visits. The answer is similar to a previous objection (I, B, objection1): he is welcomed to the Table in recognition of the authority of his home church. This goes with a sense of attachment between churches throughout the world and with the brothers and sisters everywhere. In symbol, he renews his pledge of baptism to learn from Christ as his prophet and to do so faithfully in an orderly way in the church where he is a member.

<sup>4</sup>The writer to the Hebrews exhorts to obedience to "your" leaders in the word of God (Heb 13.7. 17); in a fundamental sense, this is the essence of the membership commitment made in baptism and renewed in communion.

<sup>5</sup>Two things need to be said about exceptional cases of members in transition who are encouraged to partake at the Table. First, exceptions do not dismiss the rule, but they do cause reflection on it and test its importance. To be sure, things are somewhat ambiguous (in a sense they are members of a local church and in a sense they are not members). So, the spirit of membership must be stressed. Second, most importantly, love must rule how the church deals with ambiguous cases. The very language of members in transition emphasizes the spirit of their commitment to the local church counting them members in transition. Thus, 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 it in application to communion.