

The relationship of church membership to communion Introduction, Pt1

Background

In brief, what prompted this study is my failure to apply a belief consistently, a belief that I defended in writing when I was pastor of another church in reply to some questions. The belief to which I refer is that a person ought to be a member of a local church to take communion. I operated on this belief in my leadership here in our church early on. Over time, I lost sight of it until last October during a visit to Christ's Church of Indianapolis. I was reminded of the common church practice of fencing the Table by announcing the biblical criteria that ought to be met before someone takes communion. The criteria are faith in Christ, baptism, and church membership.

To the last criterion, it is usually added that you need to be a member in good standing in a local church, which means that you are not under church censure (under disciplinary action without repentance per the third step of Mat 18). This disturbed by conscience and I began to reexamine the biblical support for fencing the Table. Eventually, with a deep sense of need, I sought the counsel of many by bringing these things to the attention of the spiritual leaders of the church. I had two goals: 1) to restudy this subject and to rethink my past conclusions with the help of the men, and 2) to thereby articulate a recommendation to the church of a policy regarding this question of fencing the table and a process of study toward the goal of adoption. We did this. Now we have a recommendation and a process to follow.

Recommendation

We recommend to the church the following policy regarding the relationship of local church membership to communion to be studied in the coming weeks in the Bible study with related preaching toward the goal of a vote on adoption (including some word about charity in implementation):

We believe that Scripture teaches open communion with a membership requirement for partaking versus wide open communion that has no membership requirement (i.e. a public commitment to be a disciple of Christ under pastoral care and family mutuality in a local church). Therefore, it is the responsibility of the spiritual leadership of the church to gently fence participation in communion by informing those present that baptized believers who are members in good standing of an evangelical local church are invited to partake. Furthermore, it is important to ask visitors to delay partaking until they first make their status known to the pastor. Accordingly, we are to inform believers in transition regarding membership that they are welcome to partake with us as long as the nature of the transition is made clear to the pastor and the timeframe of the transition is not unduly extended.

The like-mindedness objective

Paul says to the Philippians, **Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel** (1.27). Oneness of spirit and mind is not attained automatically. It demands side by side striving to reach a meeting of minds. This takes hard work in discussion, dialogue, defining of terms, etc. The process pleases God; otherwise, we live in a way that is unworthy of the gospel of Christ. So, like-mindedness is our objective regarding membership and communion, as much as in us is possible by the grace of God.