

The relationship of church membership to communion  
Introduction, pt 2

The following is a spectrum of views on what is required for partaking of communion.

A. Open Communion (widely open to less widely open)

1) No requirement

Communion is a gospel sign and as such is a converting ordinance. This was the view of the grandfather of J. Edwards; opposing it got Edwards in trouble. It is defended by the fact that Jesus ate with unbelievers (offering them bread and wine). However, the gospel sign is a local church ordinance given primarily for the nourishing and strengthening of faith. Of course, all who witness communion hear the gospel offer.

2) Faith with no baptism requirement

The ordinance is for the strengthening of believers as a gospel sign; people may be believers without baptism: that is always the case in the sense that no one is baptized at the same time that they believe. Baptism will follow when faith is sufficiently strengthened; sometimes, this means that baptism will follow when a person who accepted Jesus as Savior is strengthened in faith to accept Him as Lord. However, this view separates what the Bible does not separate, namely, the bond of faith and baptism: **repent [believe] and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins** (Act 2.38). The promise of salvation is to repentance manifested in the obedience of baptism. The issue is not temporal connection but the inseparability of the inward and outward aspects of repentant-faith. Likewise, coming to saving faith in Christ (accepting Christ as Savior) involves acknowledging Him as your Lord: you must **believe in your heart and confess with your mouth that Jesus is the risen Lord** to be saved (Rom 10.9-10).

Returning to the inner and outward aspects of repentant faith, if one is saved by the personal acknowledgement of the Lordship of Christ (with your heart and your mouth) and if the call to repentant faith includes the call to obey Christ in baptism, then the claim to faith without the obedience of baptism (eventually in some reasonable timeframe and with willingness to be baptized on the command of Christ for entry into the new covenant community) is a questionable claim and thus not a “credible” confession of faith. Therefore, to have a faith requirement is simply to require the faith-baptism unit (requiring faith is inseparable from requiring baptism).

3) Faith and baptism with no local church membership requirement

Claim: even by implication, Scripture does not teach a local church membership requirement. This claim and its opposite in the next point is the question before us in this study.

4) Faith-baptism with a local church membership requirement

Claim: by implication, Scripture does teach a local church membership requirement. This may be called open communion because communion is offered to members of local churches without being members of the specific local church where they may be visiting.

B. Closed Communion (closed and more narrowly closed)

1) Requiring faith, baptism, and membership, some hold that communion is closed to members of a local church in our denomination.

2) Requiring faith, baptism, and membership: communion is closed to members of this local church.

There is good reason to hesitate regarding the closed communion view. On this view, how do we do justice to the brotherhood and sisterhood of the saints throughout the world? There is a universal church in which all are brothers and sisters. If we have open communion, then when members of a local church travel and visit with us on a communion Sunday (from Indiana or India), we welcome them to the Table as brothers and sisters; we express our unity with them and the family of God throughout the world.