

Why is local church membership one of the requirements for taking communion?

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Introduction

Reformed churches specifically (and most churches generally) have three requirements for partaking of communion. They are: trust in Christ alone, baptism, and membership in a gospel preaching church. For example, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (to which J. Gresham Machen and Westminster Theological Seminary are closely associated) invites to, and fences the Table, in the following words.

[We] “invite all who are right with God and his church, through faith in the Lord Jesus to come to the Lord’s Table. If you have received Christ and are resting upon him alone for salvation, as he is offered to you in the gospel, if you are a baptized and professing communicant member in good standing in a church that professes the gospel of God’s free grace in Jesus Christ, and if you live penitently and see to walk in godliness before the Lord, then this Supper is for you...come in Christ’s name to eat the bread and drink the cup” (*The Book of Church Order of the OPC*, 2011, 152). The invitation is for you if you are “a member of a faithful Christian church” and you acknowledge your unworthiness, feed on Christ by faith, and renew your “covenant with him and his people” (153).

What they call fencing the Table is not policing the Table. Instead, these requirements are read at the beginning of the service to appeal to the Christian conscience, to emphasize the nurturing role given by Christ to His churches in their local expressions, and to encourage discussion with the pastor.

Of these requirements for partaking, many people have difficulty getting their arms around the need to be a member of a faithful Christian church. There are a number of ways that the biblical evidence supporting this requirement may be expressed. A statement in a nutshell can be given and then it can be unpacked in various lines of argument.

In a nutshell, the main reason is that the Communion Table is a local church ordinance under the Headship of Christ in which God’s people (disciples) hear the gospel and give their response of covenant renewal with Christ and His church in the symbols of partaking. Put more briefly, membership is required as a concrete expression of love to a local church family, to join with them for mutual upbuilding in the faith and to guard the gospel. Stated as an argument: because it is a nourishing rite, believers own Christ as their prophet and commit themselves to learn from Him in His church in an orderly way under pastoral care and mutually edifying family love. Therefore, because of what the sacrament is in its essence, then for good order and faithfulness to the Head of the church, a participant ought to be a member of a faithful Christian church.

Hence, as a local church ordinance, participation requires local church membership. This summary statement needs to be unpacked to clarify both its biblical grounding and Scriptural meaning. There are four overlapping layers of biblical evidence. Every line of argument contains the ingredient of discipleship under Christ in His church, under pastors, and with other members.

I. 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.**⁴² **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 commit themselves to the authority of Christ’s church to learn under the care of pastors who teach apostolic doctrine, which is just to say, who make the commitment of membership to a local gospel preaching church. Put another way, surely we cannot separate being **devoted ... to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers** from being added to the church (Acts 2.41).

II. 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. “Properly” includes the stated submission to church discipline. Especially important is the fundamental level of non-crisis correcting of one

another in the normal course of mutual encouragement, while speaking the truth to one another in love.

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: it is suggested that 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 a long time 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. For people who have “left” a local church for a variety of reasons, we still ought to think of them as members in transition because of considerations like the following: 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 a membership requirement, 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. This must be qualified by the due recognition of members in transition who are welcomed to the Table.

Objection 3: it is claimed that being a member of the universal church is sufficient for partaking, even if one is not a member of a local church.

This may be the most controversial but perhaps the most important complaint that needs to be answered. We want to acknowledge the universal church of believers everywhere, but do we simply count someone a believing member of the universal church 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, and we stress the fact that we do not see the heart). 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 (Acts 2), 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 obedience as disciples learning the teachings of Christ in His church under pastoral instruction. That this baptismal commitment involves churches and pastors stems from the fact that Jesus is with the apostles *to the end of the age*. Therefore, it involves pastoral

instruction in the apostle's doctrine in keeping with the emphasis of Acts 2.42. Pastors (in the footsteps of the apostles) are to look for people who will hear their word (Mat 10.14) and commit themselves to pastoral care (owning elders as their elders) in a church duly ordered with a defined membership to guard the gospel (1 Tim 3). These things define true disciples (of course, there must be growth in these things over time as they mature).

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). So, commitment to the Head of the church must include commitment to His church, and an orderly commitment is simply a membership commitment. Having forgiveness (rest of soul) is promised to the commitment of yourself to Christ as your prophet, priest, and Head of the church. Thus, to identify Christians and disciples, 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, of being called Christians: Christians are disciples and members of a local church. In view in Acts 11 are Christian-disciple-local church members in normative Christianity.

Conclusion: 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, 1Timothy 4.16b gives us this same sentiment: **Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.** ¹⁴ **Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you.** ¹⁵ **Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress.** ¹⁶ **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). This is best qualified to mean that a claim to salvation lacks credibility when those making the claim stand firmly outside the church. Accordingly, the Table is for those inside the church *in a credible way*.

III. Good order and proper conduct in the household of God

Paul writes to Timothy: **if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.** ¹⁶ **Great indeed, we confess is the mystery of godliness** (1 Tim 3.15-16a). Good behavior in the church involves good order (1 Cor 14.40) conducive to the edification of disciples (1 Cor 14.26), and here in Timothy, it connects with the task of the church to confess a good confession in the footsteps of Christ (3.16; 6.12-16). To grow in our confession in an orderly way, we need to guard the eldership; to do that we need to guard the membership; for both we need a membership roll. Requiring membership for communion simply draws on the bond between these things.

Another way of saying this is by means of an *a fortiori* preclusion argument (or simply a good order argument). There are privileges and responsibilities that a lack of membership precludes. Baptized believers without local church membership are precluded from voting on the church budget, from voting for office holders, from being office holders, and from church discipline. Regarding discipline, it is worthy of note that Matthew 18 anticipates the local church

where ministers exercise the keys of the kingdom. Being precluded from discipline is not a good thing. Truly, discipline, as the reformers saw it, has a beneficial goal and as such is a mark of a true church. Coming into membership, a person commits himself to the discipline of the church. *Discipline has its primary and regular application in the context of one anothering love of members to members and of members to the pastor* (as J Adams states, there is a corrective level of discipline even before, and should be there before, Mat 18 kicks in).

The things precluded vary in significance, but the question is revealing: why would we have a lower standard of preclusion for communion than for voting, office holding, and church discipline? Lower here refers to the fact (where membership is not required) that a lack of public commitment to a local church does not preclude from communion, whereas, a higher standard applies to voting, office holding, and discipline. In other words, membership by a public covenant must exist with a local church for participation in such things. Therefore, *a fortiori*, if we preclude (because of a lack of public commitment to the church) from these things that are not gospel signs or sacraments, then, how much more ought we to preclude from communion because it is a gospel sign that symbolizes the unity of God's people connected with nourishment under Christ in His church. If good order applies to things like voting, how much more ought it to apply in matters of a gospel sign.

We might add that fencing the Table (by reminding listeners of the requirement of membership) relates directly to guarding the gospel confessed by the church. It alerts those that claim to be Christians that they have a part to play in confessing a good confession and they can only fulfill it in an orderly way by becoming active members in good standing of a local church.

Objection1: communion is a sacrament in contrast to voting, office holding, and discipline. So, the analogy does not hold. There can be a different standard for the sacrament (with no membership requirement) than for these other things (that require it).

Reply: a) this makes communion a universal church ordinance rather than a local church ordinance, but contradicts 1 Corinthians 11.18, which teaches that communion is not for any group of Christians to observe anywhere at anytime; it is for those who gather as a church (**when you come together as a church...it is...the Lord's supper that you eat**). b) Even if communion were a universal church ordinance, the *a fortiori* still has weight because it would mean that there is a lower standard for communion (something higher in nature in the church) than for voting (something lower in nature in the church). c) This objection tends to break the bond of the universal and the local church. The local church is the universal church in a given setting, so, if the sacrament is a universal church ordinance, it is therefore a local church ordinance where it must have good order as advanced by membership. d) This objection misses the crucial point that this gospel sign symbolizes the unity of God's people connected with nourishment under Christ in His church and connected with good order that has gospel implications according to 1 Tim 3.15 (where the duty to good conduct surfaces in a context of elder qualifications as well a corporate confession of the faith).

Objection2: the preclusion argument for a membership requirement wrongly elevates voting, office holding, and discipline to the level of a sacrament.

Reply: the only way that these things (communion, voting, office holding, and discipline) are put in the same category with communion is as matters of concern in the local church that require good order, and that good order is important for clarifying and guarding the gospel.

Objection3: it wrongly elevates a membership commitment to the level of a sacrament.

Reply: requirements for taking communion do not have sacramental equivalence with communion. Faith and repentance are not sacraments even though required for communion; a membership commitment can be required without gaining sacramental status.

Communion is a gospel sign that symbolizes the unity of God's people connected with nourishment under Christ in His church for feeding on the one Loaf and for confessing the faith. Also, to grow in our confession as disciples in an orderly way, we need to guard the eldership; to do that we need to guard the membership; for both we need a membership roll. Requiring membership for communion simply draws on the bond between these things. In other words, partaking of the one Loaf is a commitment to nourishment under Christ in His church for the joint confession of the faith. That can only be done in an orderly way with proper conduct in the household of faith by being a member of Christ's church in a local setting.

IV. The fundamental unity of the sacraments

Entering membership in a local church by baptism anticipates participation in the other sacrament of communion, and participation in communion carries the covenant of baptism forward in the life of the church. In both sacraments, we commit to being disciples in Christ's church.¹ 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?**¹⁷ **Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread**). So, in communion partaking, we symbolize our commitment to receive Christ's nourishing word; we renew our covenant of baptism to discipleship in His church duly ordered. Accordingly, when someone has left a local church, becoming a member of another is simply covenant renewal of the commitment of baptism that goes hand in hand with the renewal of the baptismal pledge that is expressed in symbol each time one partakes of communion.

A commitment to discipleship in Christ's church is just another way of speaking about a membership commitment because such a commitment to have substance must be concrete and involve pastor and flock that are owned as one's own by a disciple. 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.² 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

¹Although 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 on the pledge we make in baptism, and 1 Cor 10.17 on one loaf, Christ by which we are nourished in the gospel, and the pledge or commitment we make to Him to receive His nourishing word as Head of the church, and thus to receive it within the context of an orderly commitment to membership in His church.

² 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.

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.³

Many inconsistencies 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 practical 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. These things can only be rectified by resolving the matter of public covenant with a local church.⁴ 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. Encouraging them in this direction by informing them of the membership requirement is for their benefit. It also advances good order, clarifies and guards the gospel, promotes unity, and encourages discipleship.

For balance, 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, even where a formal break has been made with a church in which one was previously a member. 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 eventually). It is charitable to take these things as qualifying the rule of membership without eliminating it in application to communion.

Therefore, to keep things in balance while promoting love, the following statement was therefore adopted by the church: We believe that Scripture teaches that a public commitment to be a disciple of Christ under pastoral care and one anothering love in a local church is required for partaking of communion. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the eldership of the church to gently inform those present that only baptized believers who are members in good standing of a gospel preaching local church are invited to partake. Regarding members in transition, it is the responsibility of the eldership to communicate with them to discern how they are fulfilling the spirit of membership and to inform them that according to their faithfulness they are welcome to partake with us.

³Again, 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.

⁴The 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.