

The Proper Participants at the Lord’s Table

A Paper by Pastor Rory St. John

1. Introduction

The elders believe it is necessary to put a paper forward to the church for discussion on the proper participants at the Lord’s Table (communion). This essay gives a summary of our thinking on this issue, which we have needed to work through over the past two years. We will survey (2) Baptist Views of Communion, (3) Our Current Situation and View, (4) The Normative Path of Discipleship, (5) Proper Participants at the Table, and (6) Improper Participants at the Table, followed by a (7) Conclusion.

2. Baptist Views of Communion

This past year, we’ve had some difficulties wrestling through the question: who should be permitted to the communion table? This is an issue many Christians have wrestled with throughout church history, especially Baptists. Baptist views tend to be on a spectrum of “open” to “closed” communion. The three views on the right could be lumped together as “strict communion” views.

Open Communion	“Baptized” Communion	Close Communion	Closed Communion
Anyone who <i>professes to be a believer</i> is invited.	Anyone who has been <i>baptized as a believer</i> (upon a credible profession of faith) is invited.	Anyone who has been <i>baptized as a believer and a member</i> of that particular church or a church of like-mind is invited.	<i>Only members of that particular church</i> are allowed.

There were major controversies over communion within the first century of Reformed Baptist history. A well-known and documented debate occurred between John Bunyan (the writer of *Pilgrim’s Progress* who ‘bled the Bible’) and William Kiffin (one of the signers of the 1689 London Baptist Confession). Both were Baptists, that is, they both believed that credobaptism (believer’s baptism) was biblical. But they disagreed on how much we should restrict people from communion who were not biblically baptized. This is obviously a difficult issue given two very pious men like Bunyan and Kiffin could disagree on it.

The debate continued such that the 2nd London Baptist Confession of Faith (a.k.a. 1689 confession) deliberately left out a section restricting communion to those who had been biblically baptized.¹ The only unworthy participants mentioned are “ignorant and ungodly

¹The earlier 1644 and 1646 confessions clearly held a strict communion view. Benjamin Cox wrote in an appendix to the 1646, clarifying this position: “Though a believer's right to the use of the Lord's Supper doth immediately flow from Jesus Christ apprehended and received by faith, yet in as much as all things ought to be done not only decently, but also in order, 1 Cor.14:40; and the Word holds forth this order, that disciples should be baptized, Matt.28:19; Acts 2:38, and then be taught to observe all things (that is to say, all other things) that Christ commanded the Apostles, Matt.28:20, and accordingly the Apostles first baptized disciples, and then admitted them

people,” i.e., (1) those who do not or cannot believe in Christ and (2) those who deny him by an unrepentant, unholy life.² The people mentioned as participants in this section are simply labelled “believers” or “worthy recipients.”³ This left wiggle-room for Baptists with differing views. Obviously, some defined “worthy recipients” more strictly than others.

3. Our Current Situation and View

This is not just a theoretical debate. It has real-life implications for churches such as ours. We have had people (who for all we know are true believers) in our midst who have not been able to partake with us at the table. Our church has in the past several years held to a somewhat strict view. This view is alluded to in our statement of faith, *The Abstract of Principles (1858)*, in the paragraph on baptism:

“Baptism is an ordinance of the Lord Jesus, obligatory upon every believer, wherein he is immersed in water in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, as a sign of his fellowship with the death and resurrection of Christ, of remission of sins, and of giving himself up to God, to live and walk in newness of life. It [believer’s baptism by immersion] is prerequisite to church fellowship [i.e., membership], and to participation in the Lord’s Supper.”⁴

This discussion in our own church has really forced me and the other elders to think deeply about this issue. We earnestly maintain our desire to see all disciples of Christ biblically baptized (by immersion) and fully committing to church membership. This is the pattern of discipleship we see developed in the New Testament (John 4:1; Matt 28:18-20; Acts 2:37-47). However, we also recognize that true believers and disciples of Christ may sometimes be among us, who have not been biblically baptized (and potentially never will be). As we have looked specifically at the passages relating to the Lord’s Supper in the New Testament, it seems clear to us that, fundamentally, true disciples of Christ are those who are invited to the Table. Given all this, the following paragraph summarizes our current view:

The normal participants of the Lord’s Supper are meant to be believers who have been baptized by immersion and added to the membership of the local church. This is the pattern of discipleship we see in the New Testament. However, there are many true disciples of Christ who may not be from a church background where that pattern was practiced correctly, and they may even be convinced against the correct practice. Fundamentally, Jesus commands all his disciples to partake in communion, which he gives to them as a remembrance of his death in their place. Therefore, we will make exceptions for true disciples (those who have come to knowledgeable repentance and faith toward Christ), while also encouraging them to conform more fully to the New Testament pattern of discipleship.

to the use of the Supper, Acts 2:41, 42; we therefore do not admit any in the use of the Supper, nor communicate with any in the use of this ordinance, but disciples having once been Scripturally baptized, less we should have fellowship with them in their doing contrary to order.”

²Chapter 30, section 8.

³See chapter 30, sections 1 and 7.

⁴The Abstract is meant to be a summary of earlier confessions such as the 1689, and so, it could be argued, ought to be interpreted in light of the 1689.

In this imperfect world, we often find we have to make exceptions where things don't fit the ideal. I think this view will best account for the exceptions to the rule we see in our unideal church-world. It makes room for some realism and grace, while also upholding the clear commands of Scripture and seeking to teach the biblical pattern. It is a strict view with open exceptions.

4. The Normative Path of Discipleship

The pattern of biblical discipleship is clear to us: people who hear the gospel and respond in faith are disciples, and those disciples are to be baptized by immersion in water as an entrance into church membership with all this entails. We see clearly that Jesus was making disciples and baptizing them (John 4:1). We see this pattern again in the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20). We see this pattern all throughout the book of Acts (Acts 2:38, 41; 8:12; 8:35-38; Acts 16:13-15, 30-34; 18:8).

Baptism should also be understood as immersion, submerging, or dipping in water. This is the normal definition of the terms used for it in the NT (*baptizo*, *baptismos*, and *baptisma*).⁵ In classical Greek, *baptizo* could refer to a person drowning, or a ship sinking down into water.⁶ It is also used in the Old Testament when Naaman the Syrian dips himself in the Jordan River seven times (2 Kings 5:14).⁷

How does this pattern of discipleship relate to the Lord's Supper? We see a few mentions of the Lord's Supper in Acts. In Acts 2:42-47, right after the disciples are baptized and added to the church (v. 41), the concept of "breaking of bread" occurs twice (v. 42 and 46). This could simply refer to communal meals, or to communion, or to both together (the latter is likely in my understanding). In Acts 20:7 it says the disciples were "gathered together to break bread" on the first day of the week. This language of breaking bread is used when Jesus institutes the Lord's Supper (Matt 26:26; Mark 14:22; Luke 22:19; 1 Cor 11:23-24).

In the early church, the ordinance of communion was normally accompanied with an actual meal (a "love feast," Jude 12). 1 Corinthians 10-11 shows us it was something the church participated in when it gathered. All the believers in Corinth, who were said to have been "baptized" (1 Cor 12:13; cf. 10:2-3) came together to eat the bread and drink the cup (10:16-17; 11:18, 20, 33; 12:13), just as the Lord had commanded (11:23-26). When the apostles wrote to believers in churches, they always assumed they were baptized at conversion, because this was the normal practice (Rom 6:1-11; Gal 3:27; Eph 4:5; Col 2:11-12; 1 Pet 3:21).

The normal pattern, then, is that disciples are made, baptized, then joined to the church where they come together and participate in the Lord's Supper. And this is why strict communion views can be argued to be the most biblical.

But again, we live in an unideal world, where there are real disciples who have not followed this exact pattern, and yet are disciples still. They have heard the gospel and believed. They intend to follow Jesus whole-heartedly, and they do so according to their understanding of the Bible. They intend to fellowship with a church, and they rightly desire to participate with

⁵See any major lexicon. BDAG, Louw & Nida, Thayer's, Strong's. *Baptizo* is the most common word.

⁶Colin Brown, ed., *NIDNTT* 1: 144.

⁷This is the first of only two references in the LXX, the other being a metaphorical use in Isaiah 24:1, where *baptizo* means to be overwhelmed or appalled: "My heart staggers; horror has *appalled* me; the twilight I longed for has been turned for me into trembling."

other believers in communion. Do these people belong at the Table? I believe we should say yes, given the explicit wording and command of Jesus as he instituted the Lord's Supper.

5. Proper Participants at the Table

I believe when we look at the actual passages that deal with Jesus' institution of the Lord's Supper (Matt 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:14-23; 1 Cor 11:23-26), the language points us to including all true disciples at the Table.

The twelve disciples were those whom Jesus ate the Last Supper with. These were men who were called by Jesus, and they rose up to follow him and learn from him. 11 out of 12 of these men proved to be true and faithful disciples of Jesus. We know that one of the "disciples" was Judas, who actually ended up betraying Jesus and condemning himself. He had a bad heart all along that loved money more than Christ. But Jesus really did "earnestly desire" to partake of this supper with those who were his true disciples, and he looked forward to eating again with them in the Father's kingdom. Note how he speaks to these disciples.

He speaks to the disciples very personally, reiterating that the elements symbolize his body and blood that was given and poured out *for them*. "Drink of it, all of you." "This is my body, which is *for you*." "This cup that is poured out *for you*..."

He speaks to the disciples as part of the "many" he would die for. This was the blood of the covenant, "which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." Jesus uses this term in other places also to describe the people he died for, like Mark 10:45: "For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." We know these will be manifested on the last day as a countless multitude from over all the earth whom Jesus died to save (Rev 7:9; 5:9).

He speaks to the disciples as members of the New Covenant. The blood Jesus was to shed would enact the New Covenant which had been promised in the Old Testament (1 Cor 11:25). The Old Covenant, with all its yearly Passovers, and daily, weekly, monthly, yearly sacrifices, spilling the blood of countless bulls and goats and other animals, could never forgive any sins (Heb 10:4). However, there was a New Covenant promised and pictured in the Old: God's relationship with all born-again believers—those who have their sins forgiven, who know Christ intimately, and walk in his ways "instinctively" because the Spirit dwells within them. Jesus pours out his blood for all the true people of the New Covenant. And these are the people who are in view at the Lord's Table.

He speaks to the disciples with a command. Jesus does not say, "This is my body and blood; take it or leave it." He says, "Do this in remembrance of me." He says, "Drink of it, all of you." He says, "Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." This is a command, and this command is taken to heart by true disciples whenever these words are read in church! What do you feel as a Christian when you hear those words? Do you not feel like Jesus is speaking to *you*, that he gave himself for *you*, and that he is *commanding you* to drink and eat? It should be difficult, therefore, for us to withhold communion from someone who is hearing Jesus commanding them to partake.

He speaks to his disciples with an emphasis on remembrance. "In remembrance of me." The Lord's Table is a place where we bring to memory what Jesus has done for us by dying on the cross for us. It is an intelligible ceremony, not just a mindless ritual. Someone may go to Catholic Mass without thinking about what it really means, supposing they receive spiritual merit from it. But this is not how we are to partake of the Supper. It is a sober, yet joyful reminder of

what our Lord did for us personally and corporately as his bride, his sheep, and his covenant people. We can say with Paul, “he loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20)! To remember in this way, you have to actually know what Jesus did, and believe that he did it for you. In other words, you have to be a believer! You have to come to the Table with faith that is your own.

Who is it that should partake of the Lord’s Supper then? Fundamentally, it is all true disciples of Christ, the many Christ died for, the New Covenant people, those who can hear the command of Christ and remember what he has done for them personally.

Nothing is said about baptism in these specific passages. Jesus did not include words that would ensure no un-baptized or wrongly baptized person got in. Interestingly, he didn’t even fence the table from Judas. However, he made it very clear that this was given for those he died for, his people, who know him and remember what he has done for them. And Judas did not feel comfortable there. Especially apparent in the Luke passage, Jesus makes a distinction between the people of the covenant and the one who would betray him, whose hand was also on the table.

Likewise, our chief concern at communion time is to fellowship with all true disciples in our midst, in thankful remembrance of what our Lord has done for us. We make it clear that the Table is for disciples, call everyone to examine themselves, and leave responsibility to them.

At this point, however, I would re-emphasize that as a church that is seeking to follow the biblical pattern as well as the clear commands of Jesus, we would seek to be properly baptizing those who are disciples in our midst. Generally, when people come to know Christ in our church, we would baptize them before they take communion. And for children who are growing up in the church, we would lead them to true faith and repentance before we would admit them to the baptismal waters, and then subsequently to the Table elements.

6. Improper Participants at the Table

Who should we encourage *not* to take communion? As we have seen, Jesus speaks very personally to true disciples in these passages. Those who are not true disciples should be made uncomfortable at the Table. Those who are not disciples fall under two categories, which the 1689 points out: (1) the ignorant; and (2) the ungodly.

The ignorant are unbelievers—those who have not yet come to understand and believe the gospel, or who have rejected it. The table is not for those who can’t soberly and joyfully receive the elements, believing them to be a token of what their Lord did for them. It is not for unregenerate people who have yet to comprehend Christ. It is certainly not for toddlers who can’t yet comprehend the gospel.⁸

The ungodly are those who walk in unrepentant sin and hypocrisy. Jesus didn’t physically withhold the bread and wine from Judas, but he did call Judas out for his hypocrisy. The table is not for unrepentant hypocrites. It is not for those who love mammon more than Jesus. We can make this clear as we explain communion before participating in it.

Additionally, it is right for us to examine ourselves and deal with any sinful behaviour among us before participating. As 1 Corinthians 11:17-22 teaches us, a wrong participation in the Table is when church members are being divisive and selfish. The Lord’s Table is supposed to

⁸There is a current view today called “paedocommunion” or “child communion” (such as the view of Douglas Wilson). This view is inconsistent with the remembrance we are called to do when we partake. Very small children cannot comprehend the work of Christ well enough to remember him personally dying on their behalf. We should see signs of genuine, uncoerced faith and repentance toward a known Christ before we invite someone to the table.

be a visible manifestation of our fellowship and unity in Christ (1 Cor 10:16-17). If we are not reflecting unity and love in how we partake of it, we are denying the very symbols we are ingesting. So, we are called to examine ourselves, and discern ourselves and the body rightly (11:28-29, 31), so that we may partake in a worthy manner (11:27). When we approach the Table, we should ask questions like: have I sinned against any fellow-believer and not repented and sought reconciliation? Have I been selfish and unloving? Have I been divisive, impatient, or partial toward others? Have I failed to care for even the least of my brothers? If there are issues that need to be resolved before participating, then a believer may choose to forgo their participation. This is in line with our Lord's teaching on keeping short accounts with one another in the church. If a brother has anything against us, we should go and make things right before we offer any worship (Matt 5:23-24; cf. Matt 18:15; Luke 17:3-4).

While emphasizing the warning of the Table, we should also note that even true believers are "unworthy" in a sense. None of us are perfect, and we come to the Table knowing we are still in need of sanctification through Christ. We are not looking for sinless perfection before someone comes to the Table, but simply a genuine, repentant, believing heart. Communion is still a reminder that all our sins are washed away, and that Jesus loves us despite our sins. We are like Mephibosheth, a dead dog who gets to sit at the table of the King and eat his food (2 Sam 9:1-8)!

7. Conclusion

Seeing the normative pattern of discipleship in Scripture, we will encourage those disciples in our midst who have not been properly baptized and are not committed to a local body to get baptized and become members.

However, seeing as Jesus speaks to all true believers personally and commands them to partake of the Lord's Supper, we should be careful not to exclude those who are personally professing genuine faith in Christ. Practically, this may mean being open to extending communion to genuine believers who have a different view of baptism or who are not yet formal members of a church.

Additionally, we should be solemn in warning everyone against partaking in an unworthy manner. Let those who are ignorant and ungodly stay away from Christ's Table, lest they drink judgment upon themselves.

But let all true disciples gather with a true heart, remember Christ, and proclaim his death until he comes and we eat with him in glory!