

WHO SHOULD BE INVITED TO RECEIVE THE LORD'S SUPPER-

SEARCHING FOR A PASTORAL RESPONSE

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MANY DIFFERENT PRACTICES

(There are a few Christian groups which do not observe the Lord's Supper- such as the Salvation Army, most Quakers- Society of Friends, and an extreme dispensationalist group, sometimes called ultra-dispensationalists.)

1. The Orthodox denominations (Russian, Greek, etc.), Roman Catholics, and Lutherans officially believe in "baptismal regeneration"- the individual is born of the Holy Spirit at baptism, so regenerated people, infants or adults, would theoretically be allowed to receive the Lord's Supper.
2. Greek and other Orthodox churches- Babies, when baptized, then **receive the Lord's Supper. All baptized Orthodox believers may receive communion.**
3. Roman Catholic- Baptized children may receive "First Communion" at the minimum age designated in a diocese- geographical area. This will usually be around seven or eight. Older Roman Catholics who are not under excommunication and have made proper spiritual preparation may also **receive the Lord's Supper.**
4. Closed Communion- Some denominations (such as the Missouri Synod Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Orthodox), and other groups- like the "Closed" Plymouth Brethren, and some Anglicans, allow only confessing members of their group to receive communion.
5. **"Close" Communion-** The long-held practice of the Christian Reformed Church and others provided that non-CRC members needed to arrange beforehand with the elders to take communion. This is no longer the practice in most CRC churches.
6. The Churches of Christ and many "Christian" churches, which do not consider themselves denominations, believe that, after profession of faith in Christ, baptism by immersion is so closely linked to salvation that they

would not want a professing believer to take Communion until they were baptized by immersion. Some believe the baptism by immersion must be through a Church of Christ.

7. Intense self-examination- The Apostle Paul instructed that "everyone ought to examine themselves"- I Corinthians 11:27-29. The Netherlands Reformed Church, in Holland and the U.S., developed an emphasis on self-examination such that the large majority of their members do not come to the Lord's Table, including elders and deacons. Some folks evidently never come to the Table, many come infrequently, and others not until their 30's and beyond. The perhaps apocryphal story is told that when Rev. Joel Beeke came to Grand Rapids to pastor a Netherlands Reformed Church of a thousand people, only about two dozen would take Communion.

8. In the 18th and 19th centuries and even into the 20th century **Scottish Presbyterians had a practice of "Preparatory Services" during the week before a Communion Sunday, with the issuance of "communion tokens" to those** who attended. Only those with tokens could receive the sacrament on Sunday.

9. In some churches the pastor admits people to the Lord's Supper. Jonathan Edwards, the Puritan New England Congregationalist and brilliant reformed scholar, accepted the practice of the minister alone admitting **people to the Lord's Table.**

10. Some Lutherans- **Baptized children may receive the Lord's Supper** before confirmation.

11. Presbyterian Church USA- Baptized children, with the consent of parents and **the session (Board of Elders), may receive the Lord's Supper** without having made a confession of faith.

12. Some Protestants- All are invited to the Lord's Table, including unbelievers, because the Lord's Supper might become a "converting ordinance". ". . . the New Side and Log College Presbyterians [19th century U.S.] united in a unique way both the notion of fencing the table and the notion that the sacrament is a proclamation of the grace of God in Jesus Christ. They made the sacrament of the Lord's Supper an evangelistic opportunity by inviting those present to accept the faith and to come to the table. The Lord's Supper became for them an occasion for personal decision. The communion sermons of Samuel Davies are an example." (Dictionary of the Presbyterian and Reformed Tradition in America).

13. Fixed minimum ages for children or young people to be admitted to the Lord's Table- The minimum age may be set by parents, a church board, or a congregation, by official written action or by tradition. Examples of the range of practices include requiring that children can read (second grade?), not admitting grade school children, waiting until high school, having different minimum ages for boys and girls.

14. Many Protestants- all who believe in Christ as Lord and Savior, whether baptized or not, whether confessing members of a church or not, are invited to receive the Lord's Supper.

A BEGINNING

When I arrived in East Lansing, Michigan in 1966, to begin a congregation of the Reformed Church in America, I understood that the RCA tradition was **that the invitation to the Lord's Supper was to those who, in addition to faith in Jesus Christ, repentance of known sin, and love for fellow members of the body of Christ, were also "a member of a Christian church".** So our Sunday bulletin said and I said from the pulpit that you must be "a member of a Christian church".

That first year I talked with Emma, a freshman at Michigan State University, who explained that she had come to faith in Christ in the youth group of a Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Her parents were hostile to **her faith and to the church and told her she couldn't join a church or be baptized.** She explained that her parents were paying for her schooling, and **she was just glad that they hadn't forbidden her going to church (though they didn't like it), and that she was sorry she couldn't take communion, because she wasn't baptized, or a church member.** I was able to baptize her in her senior year, and perform her wedding after her graduation. But I was confronted for the first time with whether an unbaptized person or a non-church member, who nevertheless has met Christ as Savior, has openly confessed her faith, and loves **Christ's people, could also take Communion.**

COMPLICATIONS I DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT

1. Church- early on some regular attenders explained their difficulty with our member of a Christian "church" wording. They were from a Plymouth Brethren background. I had known some wonderful "P.B.s" in InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. Their places of worship are generally called assemblies, gospel halls, etc., and not churches. They do not think that

"church" is a building, a formal name or a denomination. So they feared that "church" was being used in a non-Scriptural sense.

2. Member- Some groups do not have "membership". That includes the Plymouth Brethren, whose assemblies don't have membership.

A woman from a Church of God (Anderson, Indiana) background unburdened herself on one occasion. She told me that her parents had been killed in a plane crash when she was in middle school. She had three older sisters, and they and their families were in a large Church of God congregation, of which she and her parents were also a part. After her parents' death she moved in with one of her sisters, and all three sisters and their husbands raised her. In many ways, the whole congregation- which knew and loved her parents and grieved for her- loved her and raised her. **But the Church of God doesn't have membership. So she wondered- was she wrong to take communion at University Reformed Church? Should she become a "member" of URC so she could take communion, when that made her feel like she would be rejecting the Church of God? I told her she didn't need to join URC in order to take Communion.**

(Most church leaders do not intend to pressure people to become church members when inviting them to Communion. The offer of grace in the Lord's Supper would be undermined if the invitation to Communion were used to get more church members.)

3. Membership for international students- When, in the early 1980's, Chinese students began coming to study in the U.S. and at Michigan State University, there was a totally different climate from today. Students **couldn't bring their families; they came for a year or two at the most; no undergrads came; there were "minders" in the student body (other Chinese students who spied on them). They couldn't regularly attend a Christian church, and definitely not a Chinese church, because of those there from Taiwan or Hong Kong. But some came to faith in Christ, usually through small Bible studies, and some were eventually baptized. However, they did not become members of the University Reformed Church. It would have been illegal for them to join an American organization, certainly including a church. We gladly baptized several, but "membership" was not involved.**

For other internationals there was a different barrier. Though they **would be baptized, they couldn't imagine joining an "American" church.** They thought that would be a bad witness in their home country. They planned to find and join a Christian church when they got home, to underscore that they had become a Christian, not an American.

4. Membership that is cultural, or perfunctory- On one occasion a student from a Greek Orthodox background voiced her frustration with our wording about Communion. (We were still using "member of a Christian church".) She had been raised in a Greek community and church, but came to faith in Christ in high school, through the ministry of Young Life. Her problem was concerning two friends. One friend had been raised in a Greek Orthodox background like her, meaning that she had been free to take communion since being baptized as an infant and then given communion. **She and her friend had been "members" in the Greek church since they were X months old.** But it was only cultural for both, until our student turned to Christ in high school. It bothered her that her friend, who showed little evidence of faith in Christ, and according to the Orthodox Church shouldn't take communion outside the Orthodox churches, nevertheless could take communion when she came to URC, while a new Christian from her dorm **could not, because she was not a "member" of a church.**

The same problem may apply to Roman Catholics, or others, who may have been confirmed at a young age and **after that are "members"**, and can take communion, even if their faith is only cultural.

5. An evangelical church- We once changed the Communion wording to require membership in "an evangelical church". That increased the confusion!

a. The word "evangelical" is widely used in U.S. political analysis, but it is just about impossible to agree on what it means, in belief and practice. The term provokes many questions:

"Does evangelical only refer to whites?" (It is not as widely used by African-American and Hispanic-American Christians to identify themselves.)

"Does it mean conservative Republican?"

"Is that 'evangelical' a denomination?"

"Is that the same as Baptist?"

"I'm a Lutheran- is that 'evangelical'?"

"I was raised Missouri Synod Lutheran, not 'Evangelical' Lutheran".

b. Some confessionally Lutheran or Reformed denominations avoid calling themselves "evangelicals", believing it implies shallow theology.

c. In Germany the term "Evangelical" refers to an umbrella organization of Lutheran, Reformed and United denominations, comprising about 29% of the German population.

d. Many Latin Americans use "evangelico" (Spanish) as a synonym for "Protestant", or it might be used to mean "not Roman Catholic".

FINDING A PASTORAL RESPONSE

Eventually, the Board of Elders of the University Reformed Church took action to adopt various wording of Invitation to the Lord's Supper, and Explanatory Notes, which were the basis for the Invitation for over thirty years:

"All who have confessed before others that Jesus Christ is their Savior and resolve to be his faithful subjects are welcome to this feast of love."

"All who have embraced Jesus Christ as their Savior and have confessed his name before others and are resolved by his grace to live as is fitting for his true followers are welcome at his table."

Explanatory Notes:

1. We understand that our Invitation does not restrict Christians who are not members of a church (or who are even unbaptized) from receiving Communion.

2. We agree that our counsel to our members is that they should not have their children receive Communion before they make a confession of faith.

3. We approve this as the more desirable pastoral approach to the complex range of backgrounds and situations to which our Invitation needs to respond."

An Invitation to the Lord's Supper may state that it is not the sacrament of a specific congregation, or a specific denomination, but of the Lord Jesus Christ himself. Those are always encouraging words, especially to new believers, visitors, and forgiven sinners.

If a church admits unbaptized, non-"member" Christians to the Lord's Table I don't think it will regret it. But it will probably regret it if the invitation is narrowed more than necessary. I wish I had thought things through enough **so that Emma, a young Christian, didn't have to wait three years to receive the Lord's Supper for the first time when she made confession of faith and**

was baptized as a senior. (She met a fine guy in our church and was married after graduation. A few years later she was expecting their first child and mother and baby died in an auto accident.)

WHAT ABOUT CHURCH DISCIPLINE AND THE LORD'S SUPPER?

1. Many local churches have some board which handles the discipline of the congregation's members. If church members are continuing in known sin, they should be contacted by letter, phone, or personal appointment. They may be notified not to take the Lord's Supper.

2. The church board cannot discipline the members of other churches, or members of congregations in its own denomination, or strangers.

3. Discipline has unavoidable limits in a worship service:

a. Those under discipline may take Communion, in spite of being told not to, and no one may know.

b. The church board will usually not know if a person is coming from another church which practices discipline at all, or does so in the way the church board believes is Biblical.

c. Whatever the wording of the invitation to the Lord's Supper, people will come to the Table whose practice and belief are unknown, and they may come from many churches, many backgrounds, and even many nations.

d. Sometimes people take Communion in their ignorance, when they should have abstained. I was a campus ministry intern in Boston, and went to a service at Park Street Church where Communion was served. Afterwards I saw a retired missionary from India. She had a young Indian college student with her, a Hindu, whose family she had known. She confided that she had not realized that the Lord's Supper would be served and when it was being passed she whispered to her friend, "It's for people who believe in Jesus". And he said, "But I do believe in Jesus". She knew he found it easy, as a Hindu, to "believe" in Jesus- and many other gods. He was not mocking or blaspheming; he was reflecting the syncretistic Hindu view of Jesus, and did not understand the true Christian view of Christ. And she could not carry on a hurried conversation while the Communion service proceeded.

4. The board, or whoever conducts the Lord's Supper, can state in a worship service the qualifications for coming to the Lord's Table. This may include the need for faith in Christ as Lord and Savior, for repentance, for love for his people, for open confession of faith in him. The invitation does not become more Biblical by adding a requirement that such Christians be "members" of a "gospel/ evangelical/ Bible-believing/ etc." "church".