

discipline (at best) or outside the camp of Israel altogether (at its most severe). These matters of discipline are not the responsibilities of individual members, but the decision of the elders. When David fled to Moab, ‘The prophet Gad said unto David, Abide not in the hold; depart, and get thee into the land of Judah’ (1 Sam 22:5). It was neither lawful nor good for David to cut himself off from the people of God and the means of grace. So too for us. We must seek admission to commune with Christ, but the elders of the Church are the ones called by God to rule on such request.

(4) *Admission to Communion is a Matter of Unity.* One element signified in the Supper is the unity of the Church - for we partake of one body and blood in the bread and wine. As Paul writes earlier in the letter: ‘Is Christ divided?’ (1:13). This unity is both (a) local; and (b) catholic, meaning universal. We are united locally in the sacrament together in Christ by our joint participation in His body and blood. The elders are responsible to oversee the unity of the local church (Phil 2:3, cf. 1:1). We are united universally in that communicant members from other congregations may be admitted by the session to the Table, for, indeed, Christ is not divided. Again, it is the elders which demonstrate such catholicity, being joined together in lawful Presbyteries (Gal 1:2) and Assemblies (Acts 15:6).

(5) *Admission to Communion is a Matter of Shepherding.* The command to elders is clear: ‘Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof’ (1 Pt 5:2). Being admitted to the Lord’s Table is an act of shepherding, for it is there that one feeds on Christ, and is so nourished on and by Him through faith. None may be admitted to Communion, therefore, except by the approval of the session - which is granted by (a) membership in the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America; or (b) by examination, or interview, of the prospective-communicant by the session.

III

Answering Objections

Having defended Session-Controlled Communion, it is good that three primary and frequent objections should be answered.

(1) *‘But there is no direct command for Session-Controlled Communion!’* This premise is conceded, but is not sufficient to disprove our practice. True, we have no expressed command, but, as defended, Session-Controlled Communion is derived by good and necessary consequence from Scripture - in the same way we derive the doctrine of the Trinity, or the Regulative Principle. We must be willing to consider broad principles found throughout Scripture in order to deduce Scriptural practices.

(2) *‘Isn’t examination and admission to the Lord’s Table the individual’s responsibility?’* As it has been shown, Christ has vested lawful and good authority in the elders of His Church. We must be aware that we are prone to come to God’s Word with our modern, individualistic presuppositions at the detriment of misunderstanding the text.

(3) *‘This seems oppressive and overbearing!’* Again, the order of the Church established by God is wonderful, not oppressive. It is the sin and bondage we were born into which is oppressive. Likewise, such an objection misconstrues the disposition of the session. Elders of Christ’s Church are not ‘out to get’ visitors. Rather, they desire the sanctification and strengthening of the saints. Their disposition is one of love, not tyranny, desiring the prospective communicant’s admission to the Table, if they be true Christians.

Conclusion

Though this pamphlet is by no means exhaustive, may it serve to educate and encourage the Church in the Biblical practice of Session-Controlled Communion as it is practiced by the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America.



Fencing the Table: On the Biblical Practice of Session-Controlled Communion

A Pamphlet to Encourage Believers & Covenant Families in Faithful Doctrine & Practice

‘Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof.’

Introduction

Two oft-overlooked questions in the church these days are ‘Who is admitted to the Lord’s Table’, and ‘By whose authority are they admitted?’ It is good that we should seek to answer these questions, as it relates to two of the three marks of the church: the faithful and regular administration of the sacraments, and the right discipline and governance of the church. As the *Directory for the Worship of God* of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America states, ‘The church’s practice of Session-Controlled Communion should be clearly explained to visitors, preferably by a carefully worded written statement, given out as people enter the service.’ May this pamphlet serve for such a purpose, as well as to encourage faithful doctrine and practice, by seeking to define and defend the Biblical practice of Session-Controlled Communion, and then answer various objections raised against this biblical practice.

I

Defining Session-Controlled Communion

The first task to undertake is to define Session-Controlled Communion by answering the questions (1) Who is admitted to the Lord’s Table?, and (2) By whose authority are they admitted?

(1) *Who may be admitted to the Lord’s Table?*

It is clear from the context of 1 Corinthians 10-11 that, firstly, only those who profess Christ are to be admitted to the Lord’s Table. Since Christians can partake in an unworthy manner, non-Christians cannot partake in a worthy manner; for without faith, it is impossible to please God (Heb 11:6). Thence, there are three primary criteria for who may be admitted to commune at the Lord’s Table. (a) They must be united to Christ. ‘The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?’ (1 Cor 10:16). In order to commune with Christ, we

must be first united to Christ. (b) They must be united with the Church. ‘For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread’ (1 Cor 10:17). Communion with Christ is not merely personal, but corporate. It follows, then, that in order to be admitted to the Table, one must be a communicant member in good standing (meaning, not under discipline) of what is a true, visible church. (c) Upon self-preparation, they desire to be admitted to the Lord’s Table with clear conscience. ‘But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup’ (1 Cor 11:28). Before being examined by the session (meaning, the local body of elders), the communicant must examine himself and desire to seek such nourishment on the body and blood of Christ with clarity of conscience.

(2) *By whose authority are they admitted?*

Having met these three criteria, how is one then admitted to the Table of the Lord? To most today, it would seem that it is by the authority of the individual, but this is not the model put forward by good and necessary consequence in Scripture. It is only by the permission of the elders that one may be admitted for Communion. To those who are members in good standing of the RPCNA, they are freely admitted - for though there be many local congregations, we are one Church united in Christ and bound together by confession. To those who are not members of the RPCNA, but would meet the aforementioned requirements, they may be admitted for Communion after a brief examination, or interview, with the session. Upon the session’s consent, the communicant may be freely admitted to the sacrament. This is the defining characteristic of Session-Controlled Communion, which is faithfully summed up by the *Testimony* of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America: ‘The Lord’s Supper is to be administered only to those who are accepted by the session dispensing the sacrament’ (xxix.5).

II

Defending Session-Controlled Communion

This practice of Session-Controlled Communion, having been defined, must be then defended from Scripture. There are five general principles about the very nature of The Lord’s Supper and its relation to the Office of the Elder which support as weighty evidence the claim that the practice of Session-Controlled Communion is indeed Biblical.

(1) *Admission to Communion is a Matter of Worship.*

The Lord’s Supper, being a sacrament, is an element of worship, ordained by Christ and carried out according to the prescription of His Word. As it is a matter of public worship, then, it must be carried out by the elders, who are the ones to lead in the whole of public worship, including the sacrament. As it states in the *Directory for the Worship of God*: ‘Pastors and elders should lead the congregation in public worship in a manner commensurate with the joy, dignity, solemnity and glory of such a holy occasion’.

(2) *Admission to Communion is a Matter of Authority.*

Admission to the Lord’s Table is a matter of authority. Christ, being the King and Head of His Church, has granted authority upon the lawfully ordained elders of His Church to be tasked with the just ruling and faithful oversight of the Church (1 Tim 5:17; Phil 1:1). Likewise, members of Christ’s Church are to humbly and prayerfully submit to their elders (Heb 13:7, 17). In order to be admitted to the sacrament, therefore, members must submit to the lawful and good authority of the elders and the order of the Church, who have been charged with the leadership of the Church as under-shepherds, trusting such is ordained by God, and, thus, for His glory and for the good of His Church.

(3) *Admission to Communion is a Matter of Discipline.*

Simply put, to be admitted to the Lord’s Table is a sign of good standing with the Church; to not come to the Lord’s Table is a sign of being under