

18th General Assembly, 1990,18-78, pp 170

**REPORT OF THE AD INTERIM COMMITTEE ON
FENCING THE LORD'S TABLE**

Certain overtures presented to the Fourteenth General Assembly (1986) were referred to this *ad interim* committee. These overtures concerned the interpretation or the proposed amendment of the instructions for the celebration of the Lord's Supper in the third paragraph of *BCO* 58-4. The paragraph at issue reads:

Since, by our Lord's appointment, this sacrament sets forth the communion of the saints, the Minister, at the discretion of the Session, before the observance begins, may either invite all those who profess the true religion, and are communicants in good standing in any evangelical church, to participate in the ordinance; or may invite those who have been approved by the Session, after having given indication of their desire to participate. It is proper also to give a special invitation to non-communicants to remain during the service.

Your committee members considered a variety of sources dealing with the history and traditions of fencing the table. In arriving at our recommendation, however, our prayer was that the Holy Spirit would lead us to rely only upon the written Word of God.

A number of questions have been raised:

1. May those who are not members of any particular church body be properly admitted to the Lord's table?
 - a. If so, does such admission require examination by Session?
 - b. If not, does the ambiguity of the present form require clarification: e.g. "or may invite *those communicants in good standing in any evangelical church* who have been approved by the Session. . . ."
2. If church membership is required of those admitted to the Lord's Table, should the nature of the true church be further defined or designated, as in the term "evangelical"?

In an effort to resolve these questions, we present a consideration of the issues and a proposed revision of the *BCO* language that we believe to be consistent with Scripture.

1. It is the solemn and necessary function of church government committed to the leadership to admit to, or exclude from, the Lord's Table.

The table is the Lord's as the kingdom is His, but He has given the keys of the kingdom to the officers of His church (Matthew 16:18). They are charged to be stewards of the Lord's Word, admitting and excluding according to His commandment. Those who are excluded from the fellowship of the church are excluded from the Lord's Table (Matthew 18:17, 18; 1 Corinthians 5:4, 5, 11; Titus 3:10; 1 Corinthians 16:22; Galatians 1:9). The discipline of the church is maintained by those with gifts for government (Titus 1:5; 1 Corinthians 12:28; Romans 12:8, 1 Timothy 5:17). For those who govern in Christ's church to exercise discipline as Christ has commanded, they

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must have authority over the sacraments to admit to or exclude from the sacraments, but only in accordance with Christ's Word.

2. Those who are to be admitted to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper must recognize and submit to the order of the church and its administration.

a. Since the supper symbolizes and seals communion with Christ and separation from the world, only those who bear and profess Christ's name have a right to be admitted to it.

The cup and the bread signify participation in the blood and body of Christ, and therefore participation in his body, the church (1 Corinthians 10:14-22). The table is reserved for those who are in communion with our one Lord. Those who bear the name of Christ in the world are those who have been baptized into the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost (Matthew 28:19; 1 Corinthians 1:13). Because baptism symbolizes ingrafting into Christ, it is the outward sign of membership in His body, the church. Those who bear Christ's name are required to profess His name before the world (Romans 10:9, 10; 1 Peter 3:21). The supper of the Lord, therefore, is for baptized believers who have made a public profession of faith.

b. Further, membership in Christ's church requires believers to seek the peace and purity of the church, respecting the order and discipline Christ has appointed.

Paul received from the Lord the institution of the Lord's Supper that he delivered to the church of Corinth (1 Corinthians 11:1-26). He warned against partaking of the supper without discerning the Lord's body, and charged communicants to examine themselves before eating and drinking so as not to be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord (1 Corinthians 11:22). His apostolic directions for the administration of the supper show that those who partake must recognize the discipline of the church (1 Corinthians 11:33, 34). All baptized, professing Christians are under the discipline of Christ, the discipline that is exercised in his name by his church, and, in particular, by those who are set over them in the Lord (Hebrews 13:17; 1 Peter 5:2).

It is true that the church visible is not identical with the church invisible, the church that God sees, the full number of his elect. Church councils may err, and only God can read the heart. Yet the administration of the sacraments is appointed for the church visible. The church on earth cannot infallibly determine the elect, but it must administer the sacraments as prescribed by Scripture.

3. Since denominational divisions have broken the visible unity of Christ's church, no one denomination can claim to be the church of Christ on earth. The privileges of the Lord's Table should therefore be extended to members in good standing of other communions that maintain the gospel.

The term "evangelical" historically has been used to distinguish Protestant churches from the Roman Catholic Church. But today, not only the Roman Catholic Church but some Protestant denominations do not clearly proclaim the true Gospel. The situation is further complicated by the fact that liberal denominations may have local congregations that continue to present the true faith. How may a Session responsibly determine whether prospective communicants are members of churches that proclaim the Gospel?

If the Session examines the prospective communicants, it may be possible to resolve such questions. If the fencing the table is done only by the minister of the sacrament, a clear warning is needed. No brief warning can possibly encompass the complex denominational situation. The term "evangelical" may be misunderstood. As historically conceived, a church that continued to maintain an evangelical confession of faith would be regarded as such, even if liberal leadership had emerged in it.

The confusion of the current ecclesiastical scene makes the use of the term "evangelical" inadequate, and possibly misleading. We propose to substitute the phrase, "communion that proclaim the gospel". The phrase could refer to particular congregations that are gospel-preaching in denominations under liberal leadership; it is broad enough to describe communions that exhibit the form of the church in their fellowship and discipline, even though their own definitions of their associations appear defective.

The committee would call special attention to the last paragraph of the proposed revision. The invitation that the minister gives to come to the Table of the Lord must include a clear warning. The heart of this warning is the Biblical exhortation for self examination to avoid eating and drinking judgment (1 Corinthians 11:28, 29). The warning should point out that the one who partakes worthily is the one who acknowledges himself to be a sinner without hope save in the sovereign mercy of God, who has received and rests upon Jesus Christ alone as his Lord and Savior, and who has professed his belief in Christ in a communion that holds a like precious faith in the eternal Son of God (1 Corinthians 15:3,4; John 14:6).

RECOMMENDATION:

The committee therefore recommends that the third paragraph of *BCO* 58-4 be revised to read as follows:

Since by our Lord's appointment, this sacrament sets forth communion of the saints, it is fitting to welcome to the table of the Lord not only those who have confessed His name in our fellowship and oversight, but also those who have professed the true religion in the fellowship and discipline of other churches that proclaim the gospel. Before the observance begins, the Minister, at the discretion of the Session, may either

- (1) invite all such communicants present to participate in the ordinance with the communicant members of the church; or
- (2) invite all such communicants present to participate who have been examined and approved by the Session.

In either case the Minister shall clearly state the Scriptural conditions for partaking of the sacrament, welcoming penitent sinners to the table of the Lord, but warning the impenitent and undiscerning against unworthy participation, in accord with I Corinthians 11:27-32. It is proper to give a special invitation to non-communicants to remain during the service. *Adopted and sent to presbyteries for advice and consent.*

Respectfully submitted,

TE Edmund P. Clowney, James River

TE William P. Laxton, W. Carolina

TE David C. Jones, Great Lakes

TE Joseph A. Pipa, Jr., S. Texas

RE George Griffing, LA

RE James Haber, Heritage

RE Granville Dutton, N. Texas

Chairman

CONCURRING OPINION

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We concur with the above recommendation with the understanding that in extraordinary circumstances "those who have confessed His name in our fellowship and oversight" may include persons who have been examined and approved by the Session but are not formally a part of the communicant membership. Our reasons are as follows.

Both Overture 4 (Westminster) and Overture 36 (Delmarva) to the 15th General Assembly (Grand Rapids, 1957) assert (in the words of the Delmarva overture) that "our confession of Faith clearly summarizes the teaching of the Scripture that *church membership is necessary* for the partaking of the Lord's supper" (emphasis original). It is assumed that this means having a formal relationship of being enrolled in the membership of a particular church body, but this overreaches the actual language of the Westminster standards.

According to the Confession of Faith, "The visible church ... consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children" (*WCF* 25.3). Although no text is given for support, Acts 14:23 would appear to be relevant: "Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust." The disciples at Lystra, Iconium and Antioch were members of the visible church by virtue of their profession of faith; elders were appointed to provide godly supervision in the institutional form Christ had ordained for the proper functioning of the body.

To use terminology developed later, the church is visible both as an organism and as an institution. As stated by Berkhof:

The Church as an organism is the *coetus fidelium*, the communion of believers, who are united in the bond of the Spirit, while the church as an institution is the *mater fidelium*, the mother of believers, a *Heilsanstalt*, a means of salvation, an agency for the conversion of sinners and the perfecting of saints.¹

Such appears to have been the view of Samuel Rutherford, one of the delegates of the Church of Scotland to the Westminster Assembly. Writing in 1644 (with reference to the New England congregational churches' refusal to admit to sealing ordinances believers coming over from old England who were not members of the particular churches they were attending in New England) Rutherford said:

We hold that those who profess faith in Christ, to be members of the visible Congregation, and that the seals of the Covenant should not be denied to them.²

At the same time, the Westminster divines, including Rutherford, had a high view of the visible church institute. The privileges of the visible church include "being under God's special care and government" and "enjoying the communion of saints, the ordinary means of salvation, and offers of grace by Christ to all the members of it in the

¹ L(ouis) Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1938) 567. Berkhof says in this context: "It is a mistake to think that the Church becomes visible only in the administration of the Word and the sacraments, and in a certain form of Church government. Even if all these things were absent, the Church would still be visible in the communal life and profession of the believers, and in their joint opposition to the world."

² Samuel Rutherford (sic), *The Due Right of Presbyteries or a Peaceable Plea for the Government of the Church of Scotland* (London, 1644) 185 (misprint 485).

ministry of the gospel" (*LC* q. 63). "Means of salvation" refers to what we more commonly call the "means of grace", though the Westminster divines themselves only use the latter expression once (*LC* q. 195). The *Larger Catechism* (q. 154) asks:

What are the outward means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of his mediation?

The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicates to his church the benefits of his mediation, are all his ordinances; especially the Word, the sacraments, and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for their salvation.

For the sake of good order and discipline all those who profess the true religion ought to sustain a formal relationship to a particular church body. The communion of the saints requires the institutional form of the church for its full expression. But there may be exceptional circumstances under which a true professor but non-member of a local church may be admitted to the Lord's supper. These cases are best left to the judgment of Sessions to deal with prudently in particular instances.³

Respectfully submitted,

/s/ Granville Dutton

/s/ David C. Jones

Amendment to *BCO* 58-4 defeated by the presbyteries.
1992, p. 54, 20-12, item 6.

1993, 21-56, III, recommendation 18:

18. That Overture 25 from Third Reformed Presbyterian Church [requesting that the requirement of membership in an evangelical church be deleted] be answered **in the negative.**
 - a. In recognition that this is the "Lord's table," 1 Corinthians 10:21, not the table of one church only, *BCO* 58-4 permits "open communion," that is, allowing members in good standing of any evangelical church to partake; and "close communion," which permits only those members of other churches who have been examined and approved by the Session to partake. (It does not permit "closed communion," the practice of excluding all but members of the particular congregation).
 - b. In the judgment of charity, we believe that other evangelical churches have examined and found credible the faith of their members and, on the basis of this presumed approval, in "open communion" we invite members of other churches to the Lord's table in our midst. In "close communion," the Session of a particular church itself determines the credibility of a visitor's profession of faith. There is no such available assessment in this life for members of the Invisible Church.

³ The following was the conclusion to a report sent down by the 148th General Synod (1970) of the *RPCES* to presbyteries and sessions for their study and guidance: "The committee believes that to require, absolutely, that one hold membership in a local church before one can be admitted to communion is to go beyond what is required, clearly, in the Scriptures. Therefore, we would suggest that, in exceptional cases, the local session may make arrangements for admission to communion even when church membership may not be feasible." *Documents of Synod – 1982*, ed. Paul R. Gilchrist (Lookout Mountain, TN: *RPCES*, n.d.), 313.

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- c. Baptism is into a community of believers, that is a church. Unbaptized people certainly should not be permitted to come to the Table. Of course unbaptized people credibly professing faith in Christ and seeking admittance to the Table should be baptized with all proper speed, and thereupon admitted to the Table. At this point, these communicants are baptized members of a visible church.
- d. One cannot love Christ and eschew His bride. The credible profession of persons unwilling to unite to Christ's Church must be questioned. Any sinful unwillingness to unite with Christ's people should be addressed pastorally (Hebrews 10:25; 1 Corinthians 10:16-17). Those unwilling to unite to Christ's Church are outside the visible body of Christ.
- e. One cannot be subject to Christ and not be subject to the government He has appointed in His Church. Believers become subject to the government of the Church through their covenantal vows of membership (Ephesians 4:11-12; Hebrews 13:17; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13).
- f. Church discipline is necessary for properly maintaining the Lord's table; such discipline is unavailable apart from membership in a visible church.
- g. This overture implies that there is no biblical ground for the keeping of a roll of members of the visible church, and therefore of people who may partake of the church's sacrament. However, the clear evidence of Scripture is that the church should keep a roll of members. The supreme model for our membership roll is the membership roll of heaven (Exodus 32:32,33; Daniel 12:1; Luke 10:20; Philippians 4:3; Revelation 13:8; 20:12,15). The Biblical pattern is for new believers to be "numbered" or "added to" the rolls of the local church (Acts 2:41,47; 6:7; 1 Timothy 5:9). Members could be taken away from the roll (1 Corinthians 5:2)—this indicates more than being physically barred, since even unbelievers could attend Christian worship (1 Corinthians 14:23) -- or reinstated (2 Corinthians 2:6-7); it is impossible to have coherent discipline without such a roll. There was a widow's roll for diaconal purposes (1 Timothy 5:9). Elders are to know their sheep, and are accountable for the care of the flock entrusted to them -- this demands knowing who they are; that is, it demands a list or roll (Hebrews 13:7,17-18; 1 Thessalonians 5:11-14; 1 Peter 5:2; Acts 20:28). The apostolic church utilized letters of transfer or commendation (Acts 18:27; Romans 16:1-2; 2 Corinthians 3:1; 8:23-24); examples of these letters include Philemon and 3 John. Interchurch business was conducted by people with reference letters (1 Corinthians 16:3; 2 Corinthians 8:16-24). We conclude therefore that requiring professed believers to be enrolled as members of an evangelical church as a condition for taking the Lord's Supper is consistent with sound Biblical practice.