

WESTMINSTER CONFSSION OF FAITH XXIX: 8

(Reading: 2 Cor.6:14-7:1; 2 Thess.3:6-15)

Who Cannot Join In The Lord's Supper

Article 8 is clear about one thing: There are those who ought not to come to the Lord's Supper. In fact, if those unworthy of coming to communion do come, they will be punished. And so the Lord's Supper must be supervised. The leadership of the Church must do this.

This is clear in Scripture. That's why it's in the Confession of Faith. But is it clear to the whole church? Definitely not! Actually, many churches turn a blind eye to any idea of accountability when it comes to the Lord's Supper. And woe betide any who would dare even hint that there's a standard for whether you may participate or not! Reformed folk have been called all sorts of names for supporting a restricted Lord's Supper Table. One minister was even described as being "exclusive brethren". And that was by other so-called reformed folk!

But there are a fair number of denominations who do practice a restricted and even quite closed communion. One of them are the evangelical Lutherans. Surprising? Maybe not, considering what Martin Luther himself thought of this.

You see as a representative from the Augustinians of Germany, Luther was invited to several assemblies of distinguished ecclesiastics. One day in particular, he happened to be at the table along with several prelates. Those prelates behaved in a way which was very unbecoming for their offices. They carried on as though the conference were some kind of comedy festival. They played the fool with Luther too, thinking, no doubt, he was just like them. Amongst other things, they told him with laughter and boasting, how, when reading mass at the altar, instead of the sacramental words to 'convert' the bread and wine into the Saviour's flesh and blood, they pronounced derisive words over them. In the Latin the people didn't know, they said, 'Bread thou art, and bread thou shalt remain; wine thou art, and wine thou shalt remain.' 'Then,' they said, 'we elevate it, and all the people adore.'

That humour of Rome was shocking to Luther. 'I was,' he says, 'a young and pious monk; words like these gave me acute pain. If they speak thus in Rome at table, freely and openly, I thought to myself, what would the consequences be if their actions corresponded to their words, and if pope, cardinal courtiers, and all, said mass in this way. Me, too, who have heard them read so many times with devotion, how they would have deceived me!'

Luther treated the sacrament with the utmost seriousness. So we can see why there are Lutheran denominations that guard the table today. That's something all seriously Bible-believing churches must do. This sacrament cannot be that quickly gobbled interlude it has become in so many churches with no regard as to who partakes of it or not. And how much harder isn't that made when churches don't have a table in the front of their church to which believers come around to join in holy communion?

There Is No Open Communion

But most of all, the sacrament is disdained most of all when it is not seen that THERE IS NO OPEN COMMUNION. Our first aspect to Article 8 this afternoon.

Mind you, those who have an open communion will strongly argue the point with you. They will get you to justify from Scripture the rationale for a restricted table. They will point to such a one as Judas who himself celebrated the Lord's Supper while the Lord knew he was not a believer. Well, Judas did eat bread with the Lord. But he did not eat the Lord with the bread. For as our Lord said John 6 verse 54, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day." And in verses 57 and 58 He goes on, "the one who feeds on me will live because of me," and, "he who feeds on this bread will live forever."

So Judas cannot prove to us any support for open communion. The Supper the Lord celebrated with His disciples was not a public gathering. He did it privately with them. The only ones there were those who knew the truth and who professed to be His disciples. They had certainly shown themselves to be that.

And until that night, the other disciples didn't know that Judas wasn't the believer he pretended and appeared to be. Didn't every one of them say to Jesus in Mark 14 verse 19, "Surely not I?" We also know from later on in the New Testament that no-one was admitted to the Lord's Supper without being first taught and then baptised. They had to prove they were devoted to the Lord, as Acts 2 verse 42 says. Whenever an ignorant or wicked man was found out the command of the apostle was clear. In 1st Corinthians 5 verse 13, Paul says, "Expel the wicked man from among you." And from 2nd Thessalonians chapter 3, we also learn that believers were to shun those walking apart from the Lord. Verse 6 there is clear: "keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us."

Judas does show us, however, what Article 8 says, for there are "ignorant and wicked men" who "receive the outward elements in this sacrament". But he, and those others other like him, do not receive the thing signified. There can be no blessing at all for them, for then the sacrament would have a magic all of its own.

But Scripture is clear that the sacrament simply confirms the Word in a visual way. And so it's only believing the gospel - in what you confess and how you live - which means you truly receive the sacrament. **THERE IS NO OPEN COMMUNION.**

G. I Williamson writes that it is "a man's inward condition of heart" which "determines what he receives in the sacrament. But he cannot determine what the sacrament is. And the sacrament is a divinely instituted sign and seal of the covenant. It represents Christ because of divine institution. And it does so even if it be by judgement against rather than reception by the sinner."

There Is Punishment For Wrong Communion

This is why, in the second place, we see, **THERE IS PUNISHMENT FOR WRONG COMMUNION.** When someone is "guilty of the body and blood of the Lord" it is their own detriment. Certainly that's true for the judgement that's still to come. But it's also true for what people experience here now.

The apostle Paul wrote of this in 1st Corinthians 11. After stating in the verses 27 till 29 the eating and drinking judgement on themselves by false participants, he notes in verse 30, "That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep." Yes, falling asleep in Paul's language means they've died!

They were punished now alright! As indeed are all those who are participating unworthily. It may be something as visibly graphic as this instance from history. It occurred during the minister of Joseph Woodward, a nonconformist minister in England. He had come into a church situation which needed reforming. The lifestyle of those he served had fallen into disarray.

In particular, he declared that he would only admit to the Lord's table those who, besides the usual signs of conversion, had a competent knowledge of divine things. So there had to be the right life and the right doctrine.

Well, one obstinate man was having none of that! If the minister wouldn't give him the sacrament he would take it! On the Sunday of the Lord's Supper celebration he came boldly striding into church. Everyone knew what he was going to do. But scarcely had he set foot inside the building before he fell dead! Then that congregation knew clearly what the Lord meant in 1st Corinthians 11.

This is a warning for us all. It's not only for ignorant unbelievers. There are also wicked believers. When Paul says that "anyone who eats and drinks without recognising the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself" he refers to our attitude towards other believers. While the extremely selfish, loveless spirit shown by some of those Corinthians stands out here, it's what lies in each one of us. There may well be times you shouldn't come to the Supper.

But, then again, because the Supper is coming we are given even more opportunity to be reconciled with the Lord and with our brother or sister. If we aren't depending on Christ for everything we don't belong at His table. Then we're doing our own thing. As someone wrote, "Those who don't come seeking life from the body and blood of Christ become guilty of His death."

There Is The Church To Supervise Communion

But the Church has to stand against that. And so it is, that, in the third place, we come to realise **THERE IS THE CHURCH TO SUPERVISE COMMUNION.**

Many Presbyterians cannot see how we get this out of this Article. But the question should really be, "How can we not get this out of this Article?" For after all we have seen in Chapter 29 of what the sacrament is and where the sacrament is, Rowland Ward is correct when he writes, "This section indicates the supervision of the table: only those are to be admitted who have a sufficient knowledge, who profess true faith and are living in an apparently godly way."

G. I. Williamson calls this practice "restricted communion". He distinguished it from the unbiblical "open communion". But also he differentiates it from "closed communion".

He says that while "closed communion" would have been the practice of the early New Testament church it cannot be done today. That's because while there was relative purity in the visible Church such a practice was both practical and proper. Then it would have been the only alternative to open communion.

He goes on, "If conditions were such today that all churches were true visible churches it would be incumbent upon each church to receive from every other church all members certified as in good standing, and to admit them to the Lord's table. But closed communion is not scriptural today for the simple reason that some denominations (and congregations) have ceased to be true churches, on the one hand, and because no single denomination alone is 'the true Church,' on the other. Open communion is wrong because it would admit members of false churches without evidence that they are Christians, and closed communion is wrong because it would exclude members of true churches without evidence that they are not Christians."

"Restricted communion" therefore is the elder's oversight of anyone who comes from a non-sister denomination, in the same way the elders has oversight over the members of his own congregation. We should always be ready to give an account of our faith. In fact, we should rejoice that we may do that!

At an ordination of elders in the early 19th century, Robert Murray M'Cheyne of Dundee recognised this. He said, "When I first entered upon the work of the ministry among you, I was exceedingly ignorant of the vast importance of church discipline. I thought that my great and only work was to pray and preach. I saw your souls to be so precious, and the time so short, that I devoted all my time and care and strength, to labour in word and doctrine. When cases of discipline were brought before me and the elders, I regarded them with something like abhorrence. It was a duty I shrank from; and I may truly say it nearly drove me from the work of the ministry among you altogether. But it pleased God, who teaches His servants in another way than man teaches, to bless some of the cases of discipline to the manifest and undeniable conversion of the souls of those under our care. From that hour a new light broke in my mind. I saw that if preaching be an ordinance of Christ, so is church discipline. I now feel very deeply persuaded that both are of God - that two keys are committed to us by Christ, the one the key of doctrine, by means of which we unlock the treasures of the Bible, the other the key of discipline, by which we open or shut the way to the sealing ordinances of the faith. Both are Christ's gift, and neither is to be resigned without sin."

Here is a Presbyterian who became a Reformed-Presbyterian! He knew that with the opening of the kingdom there is also a closing. In the last words of Article 8, there are those not to be admitted to this sacrament.

This is also what the Heidelberg Catechism states. There we are shown that this belief was shared throughout the reformational period. Remember the Heidelberg Catechism was written 80 years earlier. The Heidelberg Catechism states in Answer 82 that according to the instruction of Christ and His apostles, the Christian church is duty-bound to exclude those who are unbelieving and ungodly. Until, that is, they reform their lives.

Then the Lord's Supper will be truly seen for what it is. Because then there is reconciliation. And isn't that what the gospel's all about?