

THOUGHTS ABOUT THE LORD'S SUPPER

by

Philip R. Bryan, Ph.D.
President Emeritus
BMA Theological Seminary
Jacksonville, Texas

Introduction

Baptism and the Lord's Supper have always been special to Baptists. Indeed, ecclesiology is what makes Baptists distinct from other evangelical groups. Many non-Baptists have scriptural views about inspiration, incarnation, salvation, atonement, and eschatology, but they disagree with Baptists in the area of ecclesiology.

Proper beliefs and practices concerning the Lord's Supper were very important to the Apostle Paul (1 Cor. 10, 11). Wrong practice can keep the "supper" from being the "Supper." The Corinthians would have been better off without trying to observe the Supper: "ye come together not for the better but for the worse" (11:20, KJV).

Moreover, their practices also had brought about God's judgment (11:29). That is probably the meaning of the statement "many [are] weak and sickly among you, and many sleep" (11:30, KJV).

So, consideration of this doctrine is more than just a dry, academic exercise! It would behoove us to know what the Bible teaches and what God's people as Baptists have practiced through the years.

Three Views

Among Baptists historically there have been three basic views and approaches to Lord's Supper observance.

Open Communion sees the Lord's Supper as a **Christian ordinance**, which all Christians should observe. Some non-Baptists see it as a sacrament which is necessary for salvation. In that case, it would be very wrong to deny anyone a sacrament which he needs for salvation!

Most Christian denominations historically have insisted that the participants be baptized persons, but some do not, and they invite anyone and everyone to participate in observance. So-called "mixed" Baptist churches (earlier in England and now a number in the United States) and most non-denominational churches practice Open Communion.

Close Communion sees the Lord's Supper as a **Kingdom ordinance** (an old term). In this

interpretation any brother or sister of "like faith and order" — i.e., someone with scriptural baptism — is invited to participate in observance. In seventeenth century England, William Kiffin was instrumental in getting many of the Baptist churches to adopt this method (called "Restricted Communion") and stop practicing Open Communion. Of course, since non-Baptists usually do not practice believer's baptism by immersion, they were not considered qualified to join the church in its observance of this ordinance. Apparently Close Communion (sometimes called "Intercommunion") was the practice of most Baptist churches in the U.S. until the middle to late 1800s when James Robinson Graves and others convinced the majority of the churches and pastors that such practice was not consistent with their beliefs about the church.

Even the beloved and respected William Jennings Burgess, who was an outstanding associational Baptist leader of the 20th century, explained that he was a young man before he ever heard of anything else. Some times the churches in associational meetings would have the "Lord's Supper" (see W. J. Burgess, *The Lord's Table*, 1957).

Closed Communion — "Non-Intercommunion" — is the position that since it is a **church ordinance**, only the individual members of the church observing the Lord's Supper should be invited. And members who were not walking circumspectly would not be welcome. This practice apparently has been the main way that most Associational Baptist Churches (including ABA and BMA), some "independent" Baptists, and most Southern Baptists did until recent years.

Only in recent months have I personally heard of any Associational Baptist Churches practicing or advocating Open Communion, although I had heard of several who practiced Close Communion. Ironically, in the early 1950s, during the heated debate involved with the "split" between the ABA and the NABA (now BMA), both sides (quite wrongly in my opinion) accused the other of practicing and/or advocating Open Communion.

The Scriptural and Best Way

One of the chief reasons given in support of either Open or Close Communion is a sentimental one, probably used to avoid embarrassment: "*Why can't my beloved and saintly mother observe the Lord's Supper when she visits our church?*" Well, would your "beloved and saintly mother" expect to vote in the church's business meetings? Probably not. If the Lord's Supper is a **church ordinance**, then it should be the church who "sits at the table" and not visitors, no matter how dear they may be. If they meet the qualifications for church membership, they should join or otherwise wait until they are at home.

A scriptural reason often given in support of both Open and Close Communion is the Apostle Paul's instructions to the Corinthians: "**But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of [that] bread, and drink of [that] cup**" (1 Cor. 11:28, KJV). The reasoning is that if the man thinks he is okay, he should not be denied the privilege of eating the Supper. On the surface such reasoning seems proper. Several considerations, however, show that interpretation to be in error.

- If the actions at Corinth ("when you gather in church" – 1 Cor. 11:18) kept **them** from really observing the Lord's Supper ("this is not to eat the Lord's Supper"-- 11:20) because they were "divided," then think of how displeased the Lord is when **a much more diversified and divided group of people** from all different types of denominations and with many differing beliefs (e.g., belief in "once saved always saved" versus "apostasy"; believer's baptism by immersion versus infant baptism and/or sprinkling versus immersion) try to observe the Lord's Supper. Open Communion is clearly out of the question just on that principle alone.
- On the question of Close Communion, remember that the ordinance is a **church ordinance**: "when you gather together *in church*" (1 Cor. 11:18) – not the building, but the assembly, the people. It is something the church does.
- Relative to the crucial statement in 11:28, it might be wise to note that although the word *dokimazō*, δοκιμάζω, is used often to refer to "examination" with the purpose of testing gold and other precious metals, the basic meaning, however, seems to refer to **results** that demonstrate the test has been "passed." That is why the American Standard Version of 1901 says: "But let a man **prove** himself, and so let him eat of the bread, and drink of the cup." The question is: "To whom does he prove himself?" I think it is the church. In Paul's first letter to Timothy he uses the same word relative to deacons:

"And let these also first be **proved**; then let them use the office of a deacon, being [found] blameless" (1 Tim 3:10, KJV).

The ASV uses the word "prove" in both places. Similarly, the KJV uses "prove" in Romans 12:2:

"And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may **prove** what [is] that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God."

The American Heritage Dictionary lists the first meaning of "prove" to be:

"*tr.* 1. To establish the truth or validity of by presentation of argument or evidence."

A cognate adjective, *dokimos*, δοκιμός, brings out the idea very clearly. Notice the following references:

"Study to shew thyself **approved** unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15, KJV).

In the same passage in 1 Corinthians 11, Paul uses this adjective to demonstrate that even

divisions sometimes bring valuable results: They show who the "approved" (or "qualified" people) are:

"For there must be also heresies among you, that they which are **approved** may be made manifest among you" (1 Cor 11:19, KJV).

Closed Communion seems to be the scriptural and best way because of the following considerations:

- It recognizes communion as a **church** ordinance. Of course, universal, invisible church adherents believe that all the saved are in the church, whether baptized or not. They would argue for Open Communion.
- The "body of Christ" metaphor is best interpreted in a strictly local setting, with the various members united and functioning together – not some vast amorphous body scattered throughout the world and composed of the living and dead. Paul's discussion of the "body" and the "communion" in 1 Corinthians 10 is illustrative of this fact.
- Church members are under the **nurture and discipline** of the church in which they hold membership. Outside that setting real nurture and discipline would be difficult to achieve.
- The Lord's Supper, under the lordship of Christ, is conducted and protected by the church – hence Paul's earlier admonition not to "eat" with a "brother" who is not living as he should (1 Cor. 5:11). 1 Corinthians 5 is a chapter which includes references to church discipline. A number of allusions to "leavened" and "unleavened" bread and the keeping of the "feast" (perhaps metaphorical), followed by the injunction against "eating" suggest a likely reference to the Lord's Supper. Many earlier (i.e., 20th century) Baptists saw here a reference to the Lord's Supper. Other groups (e.g., Anabaptists) have used this to argue for "shunning" somebody completely.
- Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 11:2, Paul refers to "keeping the ordinances" as he has "passed them on to you." He then talks about decorum among women and men (heads covered or uncovered) and continues with admonitions about the Lord's Supper (vv. 17ff.). The word translated "ordinances" (*paradoseis*, παραδόσεις) in verse 2 is a noun related to his discussion about the Lord's Supper: "For what I received (*parelabon*, παρέλαβον) from the Lord, I also delivered (*paredōka*, παρέδωκα) unto you" (1 Cor. 11:23). The noun which the KJV translates as "ordinances" is cognate with the verb ("delivered") Paul uses when referring to the Lord's Supper.
- Because of church discipline Paul gives his command in verse 28 about "examining and eating." These people are probably the "**approved**" ones in verse 19. To say that the church **should let** (i.e., "permit") one to eat presupposes the idea also that the church **should not permit** someone else to eat in other circumstances. So, it is not just a matter of

someone examining himself and deciding that everything is okay. That, no doubt, was what they had already been doing. They thought they were fine. The church should let eat only those who have demonstrated that they are indeed in fellowship with the church. The word "communion" (*koinōnia*, κοινωνία) means "fellowship."

- There is such a thing as "Christian fellowship" which we have with all born again believers, but there is also "Church fellowship" which we have only with the members of our respective churches.

No Official Position

As best as I can determine, BMA Baptists have never officially designated Closed Communion as the only kind of scriptural communion, but their various articles of agreement and doctrinal statements are most compatible with that position. Statements in the SBC *Baptist Faith and Message* are compatible as well. As stated above, Close Communion has been practiced to some extent. Open Communion has been condemned many times in those same Associational Baptist documents.

While I do not see that we should ever discriminate against a church or brother who advocates or practices Close Communion, *I believe there is no room for Open Communion* – that is, unless we want to wipe out all distinctions between the church and the world or scriptural and unscriptural practices. Most of the people and groups advocating Open Communion are also very weak in their beliefs concerning baptism and other aspects of ecclesiology. If we wipe out all of those distinctions, we cease to be Baptists. Is that why some choose to drop the name "Baptist" or "church" to designate their group? Do they mean that they have ceased to be a Baptist Church?

Jacksonville, Texas

February 25, 2001

Click "Back" to return to Home Page