

Open or Closed Communion?

By Clinton Wahlen

From time to time questions have arisen as to why Seventh-day Adventists have an open communion service, meaning that all who have committed their lives to Jesus Christ may participate and that “children learn the significance of the service by observing others participating.”¹ Some who argue that the communion service should be closed, whereby only members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church may participate, appeal primarily to our historical practice and to 1 Corinthians 11:17-34. I will address these two issues in turn.

Historical Practice of Seventh-day Adventists

As with our understanding of Daniel and Revelation, healthful living, the Godhead, etc., it appears that the Seventh-day Adventist understanding of this subject has developed over time. In our early years, Seventh-day Adventists did indeed celebrate a closed communion.

In an influential article of 1873, G. I. Butler contended that the communion service should only be open to Seventh-day Adventist members. He based this conclusion on the absence of Judas from the Last Supper and several Bible passages (1 Cor 10:15-21; 11:17-34; 2 Cor 6:14).² He reiterated this position in 1886 and 1908.³ However, it may be that this practice was not universal. According to W. H. Littlejohn, “Generally speaking, Seventh-day Adventists are close communion [sic] in principle. It is customary, therefore, to invite those only to partake of the communion who are members in good and regular standing in Seventh-day Adventist churches.”⁴ This statement suggests that there may have been some variation among Adventists even in this early period.

By the time the first edition of the *Church Manual* was published in 1932, it is possible that the practice of closed communion was no longer maintained. While it indicates that the communion service “should be attended by all church members” and that no church members should remain away from the service,⁵ it then quotes *The Desire of Ages*, p. 656 under the heading “None to Be Excluded”: “There may come into the company persons who are not in heart servants of truth and holiness, but who may wish to take part in the service. They should not be forbidden.” The next paragraph reinforces the first point, under the heading “Every Member Should Attend,” by a further quote from the same page.⁶ However, it is also possible that this quotation of Ellen White was understood at the time as referring only to church members, since they are referred throughout this context, both before and after the quotation.

The edition of the *Church Manual* published in 1971 is no clearer. On p. 118, under “Who May Participate,” it again quotes *The Desire of Ages*, p. 656, followed by a further quotation from the same page under “Every Member Should Attend.”⁷ Only in 1990 is the point clarified that the Seventh-day Adventist Church practices open communion with children encouraged to observe but not participate until they are baptized: “*Who May Participate*. —The Seventh-day Adventist Church practices open Communion. All who have committed their lives to the Saviour may participate. Children learn the significance of the service by observing others participate. After receiving formal instruction in baptismal classes and making their commitment to Jesus in baptism, they are thereby prepared to partake in the service themselves.”⁸

In checking the statements of fundamental beliefs from 1931 to 1979, the communion service is not mentioned at all. However, when the revised statement of fundamental beliefs was voted at the 1980 GC session, No. 15, “The Lord’s Supper,” was added; it includes the affirmation that “the communion service is open to all believing Christians.”⁹ Elder Neal C. Wilson, General Conference President, asked for an expression from the body of delegates to the General Conference Session as to whether the wording as to who may participate in the Lord’s Supper should be “baptized Christians” (the originally-proposed wording) or “believing Christians” (wording suggested from the floor). The minutes show that most of the delegation preferred the wording “believing Christians.”¹⁰ Prior discussions at the General Conference Session a week earlier make clear that the wording “baptized Christians” was suggested in order to exclude unbaptized children of Adventist members from participating, not in order to exclude Christians from other faiths.¹¹ Clearly, by 1980, open communion was the accepted practice of the Seventh-day Adventist Church worldwide.

From my own experience, the discussions at the 1980 General Conference Session and the wording clarification made in the 1990 edition of the Church Manual reflect the accepted practice of open communion in the Adventist Church of North America at least as early as the 1970s. My colleague, Gerhard Pfandl, indicated to me that this was also the practice in Europe and Australia.¹² Furthermore, it seems probable that open communion began to be widely practiced already by the early decades of the twentieth century, based on Ellen White’s statements in *The Desire of Ages* first published in 1898. Certainly the book quickly influenced Adventist views on other subjects, such as the eternal deity of Christ, so it would not be surprising if open communion began to be practiced in Adventist churches very soon after its publication. The earliest confirmation I have found that this Ellen White statement was understood to teach open communion is in the book *Evangelism*, published in 1946:

Not Close Communion—Christ’s example forbids exclusiveness at the Lord’s supper. It is true that open sin excludes the guilty. This the Holy Spirit plainly teaches. But beyond this none are to pass judgment. God has not left it with men to say who shall present themselves on these occasions. For who can read the heart? Who can distinguish the tares from the wheat?—*The Desire of Ages*, 656 (1898).

There may come in among you those who are not in heart united with truth and holiness, but who may wish to take part in these services. Forbid them not.—*Manuscript 47*, 1897.¹³

Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

Regarding the exegesis of 1 Corinthians 11, Paul gives no indication that the church is charged with examining whether participants have made adequate spiritual preparation for partaking of the Lord’s Supper. Rather, each person is to examine himself (or herself—the term *anthrōpos* is inclusive of both genders) before coming to the service (v. 28; see also 2 Cor 13:5). In addition, the ordinance of humility is to assist with the necessary spiritual preparation (John 13:1-17). Just as in the law of Moses in which often the Lord was entrusted with executing judgment when there were no witnesses,¹⁴ so also here (vv. 30, 32). Only the Lord can read the heart (1 Sam 16:7). We are not to judge or condemn in such matters (Luke 6:37). The exception, as indicated by Ellen White, is “open sin.”¹⁵ Children who are not yet baptized should not participate in the Lord’s Supper, because the ordinance of humility or foot washing is predicated on a prior baptism by immersion (John 13:10).¹⁶

The statement in Fundamental Belief No. 16, that “the communion service is open to all believing Christians,”¹⁷ is in harmony with these passages of Scripture and the statement by Ellen White. The word *believing* clearly means more than simply “professed” or else the word would not be needed because “Christians” by definition profess faith in Christ. It implies an ongoing and active connection with Christ that would exclude open sin. If a person is engaging in open sin, then he or she is not really “believing” in the biblical sense of faith that evidences its genuineness by obedience (John 14:15; 1 Cor 7:19; Gal 5:6; 1 John 5:2-4).

Conclusion

While up to the 1880s the Seventh-day Adventist Church *generally* practiced closed communion, after Ellen White’s publication in 1898 of *The Desire of Ages* with its clear explanation of the Last Supper as the basis for the practice of communion, Adventists moved to an open communion in which “all believing Christians” may participate. The Bible encourages Christians to examine themselves as to their own preparedness for participating in the communion service. Since we cannot read the heart, the church is only to exclude those who are living in open sin. In view of the fact that the preparatory service of foot washing symbolically represents a renewal of the covenant made at one’s baptism, children should not be invited to participate in the communion service until after they are baptized.

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¹ *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, 19th ed. (Secretariat, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, printed in Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2016), 126.

² G. I. Butler, “Open and Close Communion,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, May 27, 1873, pp. 185, 186 (reprinted: *ibid.*, Dec. 9, 1880, pp. 369-371).

³ See G. I. Butler, “Sundry Questions and Answers,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Feb. 2, 1886, p. 74, col. 1; *idem.*, “What Is It to Be a Seventh-day Adventist?” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Oct. 1, 1908, pp. 7, 8.

⁴ W. H. Littlejohn, “The Church Manual,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Aug. 28, 1883, p. 554, col. 2.

⁵ *Church Manual*, [1st ed.] (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1932), 159.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 159, 160.

⁷ *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, [10th ed.] (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1971), 159. Similar treatments are found in the editions of 1976 (pp. 122, 123), 1981 (pp. 118, 119), and 1986 (pp. 80, 81).

⁸ *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, [14th ed.] (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1990), 80, 81.

⁹ *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Archives and Statistics, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1981), 6.

¹⁰ General Conference Bulletin No. 9, in *Adventist Review*, May 1, 1980, p. 21.

¹¹ General Conference Bulletin No. 6, in *Adventist Review*, April 24, 1980, p. 29.

¹² Private communication, July 22, 2016.

¹³ Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1946), 277 (emphasis original).

¹⁴ See, e.g., the case of something damaged or of suspected theft and the required vow before the Lord (Exod 22:10, 11) and the case of suspected adultery with the required trial by ordeal (Num 5:11-28).

¹⁵ Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1940), 653; cf. 1 Cor 5:11.

¹⁶ Further, see Robert M. Johnston, “Unbaptized children and Communion,” *Ministry* 79/6 (June 2007), 15.

¹⁷ *Church Manual* (2015), 167, 168.

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