

# For Members Only?

## Who Should Partake of the Lord's Supper?

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**B**aptism is a public invitation of the new believer into union with Christ and His body, the church (Rom. 6:3-6; Eph. 1:22, 23; 1 Cor. 12:13). Therefore, only an individual who has expressed his faith in Jesus Christ as his personal Saviour and Lord and who wishes to enter into a bond of union with Him and His church should participate in this ordinance.

But who may take part in the other two ordinances, foot washing and the Lord's Supper? This question has generated considerable discussion among Christians, particularly with respect to the Lord's Supper. Some groups practice what is known as closed Communion. The phrase means that these denominations restrict the rite to their own members, or even to members of a given congregation.

Other churches allow what is known as open Communion. They welcome all Christians to the table of the Lord regardless of their particular denominational affiliation. Historically, Seventh-day Adventists have always followed this practice. Our Statement of Fundamental Beliefs, published annually in the *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, states, "The Communion service is open to all believing Christians."<sup>1</sup> Let's take a look at the biblical basis for this practice.

### Communion—A Service for Believers Only

We may take our physical nourishment alone or with others. But because of the fellowship it offers, we usually prefer the latter. In this respect the sacred meal is no different. While it may be eaten alone, the Saviour instituted this ordinance in a group setting.

In his first letter to the Corinthians the apostle Paul draws attention to the *communion*, or *fellowship*, aspect of the Lord's Supper. He observes that this ordinance involves two sets of relationships: (1) the believer and Christ and (2) the believer and his Christian brethren.

Speaking about the first, he says, "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion [Greek: *koinōnia*—"fellowship, a close mutual relationship"] of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion [*koinōnia*] of the body of Christ?" (1 Cor. 10:16).

Here Paul is emphasizing primarily the believer's relationship to the Saviour. His statement recalls to mind Jesus' striking words "Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you. . . . He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him" (John 6:53-56).

When the believer in humble gratitude eats and drinks the emblems of the Saviour's broken body and shed blood, he confesses anew his faith in Jesus Christ. He thereby expresses his trust in Him as his personal Saviour and Lord, and reaffirms his belief that God for Christ's sake has forgiven him and has accepted him as His child.<sup>2</sup>

What, then, is the primary significance of this sacred service? In a sense, it is not a meal at all, but the Christian's confession, in symbol, of his faith in Jesus Christ. The Lord's Supper, then, is obviously a ritual *for Christians*, that is, for those who acknowledge Christ as Saviour and Lord. Non-Christians and those who are not yet old enough to commit their lives intelligently to Christ would naturally be excluded from participation.

While the Lord's Supper primarily serves to link the believer to his Saviour, it also strengthens the fellowship of believers. Paul wrote, "For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread" (1 Cor. 10:17). As all the pieces of the Communion bread eaten by the believers come from one loaf, so all the believers who partake of the Communion service are united in Him whose broken body is typified by that broken bread. By partaking

1 *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1986), 6. See also "Lord's Supper," *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1976), 813, 814; and *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* (Washington, DC: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1986), 80, 81.

2 See Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1940), 389.

together of this ordinance, Christians show publicly that they are united and that they belong to one great family, whose head is Christ.<sup>3</sup>

### Should Some Christians Excluded?

Would Jesus observe closed Communion if He were with us today? (His example should determine our practice; see Matt. 16:24; 1 Peter 2:21.) The events that occurred in the upper room when Jesus instituted the Supper clearly indicate His attitude toward such a restriction.

When we synchronize the accounts that Luke and John wrote, we obtain the chronological sequence of what took place on Christ's last evening with His disciples: (1) The Passover meal began (Luke 22:14-18). (2) Jesus arose and washed the feet of the disciples (John 13:1-17), including those of Judas. (3) Jesus instituted the Supper, consecrating the bread and wine and passing them to the disciples (Luke 22:19, 20). (4) Jesus identified Judas as the one who would betray Him (verses 21-23; John 13:18-26). (5) Judas departed, leaving so abruptly that the confused group did not understand what had happened (John 13:27-30).

All 12 of the disciples presented themselves for the Passover meal with Jesus (Matt. 26:20; Mark 14:17; Luke 22:14). Judas Iscariot was one of this special band that Christ had appointed to preach in His name (Mark 3:14-19; Luke 6:13-16). Along with the others Judas had exercised special powers to cast out unclean spirits "and to heal all manner of sickness and all manner of disease" (Matt. 10:1). He also functioned as treasurer for the group (John 12:6; 13:29).

Prior to Passover time Judas made arrangements to betray his Master (Matt. 26:14-16). But the Saviour was not taken by surprise. He was fully aware of His disciple's treachery, and had said openly to all of them some months earlier, "Have not I chosen you twelve, and one of you is a devil?" (John 6:70).

When the disciples assembled in the upper room on that special occasion, there was no servant to wash their feet, and none of them assumed the task. So while the meal was in progress (probably in its early stages), Jesus arose to carry out that courtesy (John 13:2-5, RSV).

In this process Jesus washed the feet of Judas, His betrayer, knowing full well what the latter had already covenanted to do! Jesus intimated this knowledge when, while washing their feet, He openly said to the disciples, "Ye are clean, but not all" (verse 10).

Jesus identified the still-present betrayer only *after* instituting the Lord's Supper.<sup>4</sup> Luke's description reads as follows: "And he took bread, and gave thanks, and brake it, and gave unto them, saying, This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me. Likewise also the cup after supper, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you. *But* [Greek: *plēn*—a conjunction, meaning in this instance "nevertheless," "however," or "but"], *behold, the hand of him that betrayeth me is with me on the table*" (Luke 22:19-21).

By using that conjunction, Luke linked Christ's statement regarding the symbolic significance of the wine to His announcement of the betrayal by one present. Jesus spoke of the new covenant being sealed by the shedding of His blood, and said that at that very moment the hand of the one whose treachery would lead to the shedding of His blood was on the table they were gathered around. Judas participated not only in the Passover meal and the foot washing but also in the Communion supper.

Ellen White describes the scene in these words: "Judas the betrayer was present at the sacramental service. He received from Jesus the emblems of His broken body and His spilled blood. He heard the words, 'This do in remembrance of me.' And sitting there in the very presence of the Lamb of God, the betrayer brooded upon his own dark purposes, and cherished his sullen, revengeful thoughts."<sup>5</sup>

### An Evangelistic Ritual

Why did the Saviour permit Judas to participate in these three sacred events: the Passover, the washing of the feet, and the Communion supper? No doubt one reason was to give assurance to the apostles (as they later reflected on this experience) that their Master was truly the divine Son of God, the Messiah, that He was in full control and knew all about Judas and the events that lay before Him (see John 13:18, 19).

But there was a more important reason: the Saviour's compassion, His desire to save Judas. Up

<sup>3</sup> *The SDA Bible Commentary* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1980), vol. 6, p. 746.

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that in order to emphasize the dismay and consternation produced by Christ's announcement of His betrayal, Matthew and Mark reverse the order of the events, placing the announcement at the beginning of the Passover meal. Luke, on the other hand, records the incidents in their natural sequence.

<sup>5</sup> White, p. 653.

until this night, Judas had not closed the door of his probation. Mercy still appealed, and “Jesus still gave him opportunity for repentance.”<sup>6</sup> Ellen White comments: “Though Jesus knew Judas from the beginning, He washed his feet. And the betrayer was privileged to unite with Christ in partaking of the Sacrament. A long-suffering Saviour held out every inducement for the sinner to receive Him, to repent, and to be cleansed from the defilement of sin.”<sup>7</sup>

From this brief sketch it is evident that the Saviour would never practice closed Communion. None of the disciples were without fault when they assembled in the upper room (see Luke 22:24). But through means of the foot washing and the Supper, the Saviour drew all but one into a state of humble penitence and trust in Him.

This is why Seventh-day Adventists practice open Communion. We cannot read the inner thoughts of those Christians who assemble with us, but we know that the Holy Spirit is present to woo any resisting sinners who make only a profession of faith. Who can say that, as the Spirit uplifts the loving Christ (see John 12:32), no one will respond to this “ritual evangelism”?

In view of what Jesus did, Ellen White wrote this counsel for the church: “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. 1 Cor. 5:11. 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? . . .

“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. . . .

“Christ by the Holy Spirit is there to set the seal to His own ordinance. He is there to convict and soften the heart. Not a look, not a thought of contrition, escapes His notice. For the repentant, brokenhearted one He is waiting. All things are ready for that soul’s reception. He who washed the feet of Judas longs to wash every heart from the stain of sin.”<sup>8</sup>

### Unbaptized Children and Communion

Since the original Passover appears to have been a family meal (Ex. 12:21, 26), some suggest that un-

baptized children should be allowed to participate in the Lord’s Supper. But just as Seventh-day Adventists reject infant baptism, we disavow “infant Communion” and “infant foot washing” as well.

Christianity, as it is portrayed in the Scriptures, is a believer’s religion. To enter into union with Jesus Christ through the rite of baptism, an individual must be old enough (1) to understand the truths of the faith (see Matt. 28:20), (2) to make an intelligent commitment to Jesus Christ as his personal Saviour and Lord (Acts 16:30, 31), and (3) to repent from sin (Acts 2:38).

Like baptism, foot washing is a believer’s ordinance—as is the Communion service, a ritually worked-out reaffirmation of the believer’s faith in Jesus Christ. The focus of the Communion meal is not really on family togetherness (father-mother-child or husband-wife). Rather, this service emphasizes the believer’s profession of faith in his Redeemer and union with like believers who compose the church—Christ’s mystical body.

(We may note here that although an Israelite male was circumcised on the eighth day of his life—thus bringing him within the covenant bond—he did not become a full-fledged “son of the law” (*bar mitzvah*) and functioning member of the congregation until he reached his thirteenth birthday.)

Although unbaptized children should not participate in the ordinances, parents can begin to instruct them in their meaning (see Deut. 6:6, 7). Even this instruction does not mean a child is necessarily ready to take part in the ordinances, however. Just because a teenager comes to understand something about love, it does not follow that he is ready for matrimony! Nor does the fact that a small boy can guide the family automobile down the street while he sits on his father’s lap mean that he is ready for a Buick instead of a tricycle. Pushing into a child’s experience what is designed for more mature years is not healthy. Reserving the privileges that attend church membership for the time when the child comes spiritually mature enough to be baptized is in harmony with nature and the Scriptures.

### Eating Damnation to Ourselves

“Whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself,

6 Ibid., 655.

7 Ibid. See also p. 645.

8 Ibid., 656.

and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. for he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body" (1 Cor. 11:27-29).

This passage has caused some Christians undue concern. As sinners, we are all unworthy of the grace of God. No one is worthy of the least of His favors (see 1 Tim. 1:15). But the apostle is not speaking of this. The word *unworthily* (Greek: *anaxiōs*) is an adverb that means "in an unworthy or careless manner." In context Paul is speaking about the *unworthy manner* in which the Corinthians were participating in the Supper. They came with bitter contentions among themselves (1 Cor. 1:11) and in quarreling factions (1 Cor. 3:3). Apparently some even came in a drunken condition (1 Cor. 11:21; Greek: *methuō*, "be drunk"). In those times it was common to have a social meal before the ordinances were celebrated.

To approach the Lord's table in an unworthy manner, cherishing known sin against God or against one's brother, is to fail to see the purpose of the Saviour's life, and atoning death, which the rite symbolizes. Such boldness does despite to God's grace and demonstrates the superficiality of a Christian experience that is only a profession.

But to the committed followers of Christ, participation in the ordinances of foot washing and the Communion supper recalls the abundance of divine mercy and the need for repentance. These services offer them an invitation to renew their faith in the Lord Jesus and to strengthen anew the bond of fellowship with other be-

lievers. This naturally calls them to lay "aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies, and all evil speakings" (1 Peter 2:1) and to attempt to remove all differences with family or church members (see Matt. 5:23, 24; James 5:16). The ordinance of foot washing especially permits a time for reconciliation. And as it reminds us that the blood of Jesus Christ continues to cleanse the heart from every stain (1 John 1:7), it provides a grand assurance. Entered into with a true spirit, such a ritual strengthens the bonds of Christian brotherhood.

In the Communion supper that follows we confess again our faith in the Saviour. As we contemplate the wonder of Calvary we seem to hear Him say: "Under conviction of sin, remember that I died for you. When oppressed and persecuted and afflicted for my sake and the gospel's, remember My love, so great that for you I gave My life. When your duties appear stern and severe, and your burdens too heavy to bear, remember that for your sake I endured the cross, despising the shame. When your heart shrinks from the trying ordeal, remember that your Redeemer liveth to make intercession for you" (*The Desire of Ages*, 659).

And beyond the symbols of the basin and towel, the bread and the cup, rises before our mind's eye the long anticipated scenes of the blessed hope, the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power and great glory, coming for His own, His waiting people, as He promised (John 14:1-3). "For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come" (1 Cor. 11:26).