



THE
LORD'S
TABLE

J. C. RYLE (1816-1900)

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THE LORD'S TABLE

*“Let a man examine himself, and so let him eat
of that bread, and drink of that cup.”*

—1 Corinthians 11:28

The words which form the title of this paper refer to a subject of vast importance. That subject is the sacrament¹ of the Lord's Supper.

Perhaps no part of the Christian religion is so thoroughly misunderstood as the Lord's Supper. On no point have there been so many disputes, strifes, and controversies for almost 1,800 years. On no point have mistakes done so much harm. Even at this very day the battle is still raging and Christians seem hopelessly divided. The very ordinance that was meant for our peace and profit has become the cause of discord and the occasion of sin. These things ought not so to be!

I make no excuse for including the Lord's Supper among the leading points of practical Christianity. I believe firmly that ignorant views or false doctrine about this sacrament lie at the root of half the present divisions of professing Christians. Some neglect it altogether; some completely misunderstand it; some exalt it to a position it was never meant to occupy and turn it into an idol. If I can throw a little light on it and clear up the doubts of some minds, I shall feel very thankful. It is hopeless, I fear, to expect that the controversy about the Lord's Supper will ever be finally closed until the Lord comes. But it is not too much to hope that the fog, mystery, and obscurity with which it is surrounded in some minds may be cleared away by plain Bible truth.

In examining the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, I shall content myself with asking four practical questions and offering answers to them.

1. Why was the Lord's Supper ordained?
2. Who ought to go to the Table and be communicants?²
3. What may communicants expect from the Lord's Supper?
4. Why do many so-called Christians never go to the Lord's Table?

¹ **sacrament** – A sacrament is an holy ordinance instituted by Christ, wherein, by sensible signs, Christ and the benefits of the new covenant are represented, sealed, and applied to believers. (*The Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Question 92) Many Protestants today use the word *ordinances* instead of *sacraments* to distinguish from the Roman Catholic Church's view of sacraments that confer saving grace. The Bible teaches there are two ordinances instituted by Christ in the New Testament: baptism and the Lord's Supper.

² **communicants** – persons who receive the Lord's Supper.

I think it will be impossible to handle these four questions fairly, honestly, and impartially without seeing the subject of this paper more clearly, and getting some distinct and practical ideas about some leading errors of our day. I say “practical” emphatically. My chief aim in this volume is to promote practical Christianity.

1. Why Was the Lord’s Supper Ordained?

In the first place, why was the Lord’s Supper ordained? I answer that question in the words of the Church Catechism.³ I am sure I cannot mend them. It was ordained “for the continual remembrance of the sacrifice of the death of Christ, and of the benefits which we receive thereby.” The bread, which in the Lord’s Supper is broken, given, and eaten, is meant to remind us of Christ’s body given on the cross for our sins. The wine, which is poured out and received, is meant to remind us of Christ’s blood shed on the cross for our sins. He who eats that bread and drinks that wine is reminded, in the most striking and forcible manner, of the benefits Christ has obtained for his soul, and of the death of Christ as the hinge and turning point on which all those benefits depend.

Now, is the view here stated the doctrine of the New Testament? If it is not, forever let it be rejected, cast aside, and refused by men. If it is, let us never be ashamed to hold it fast, profess our belief in it, pin our faith on it, and steadfastly refuse to hold any other view, no matter by whom it is taught. In subjects like this we must call no man master. It signifies little what great bishops and learned divines have thought fit to put forth about the Lord’s Supper. If they teach more than the Word of God contains, they are not to be believed.

I take down my Bible and turn to the New Testament. There I find no less than four separate accounts of the first appointment of the Lord’s Supper. St. Matthew, St. Mark, St. Luke, and St. Paul—all four describe it. All four agree in telling us what our Lord did on this memorable occasion. Two only tell us the reason that our Lord assigned why His disciples were to eat the bread and drink the cup. St. Paul and St. Luke both record the remarkable words, “This do in remembrance of me.” St. Paul adds his own inspired comment: “As often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew [or declare, proclaim] the Lord’s death till he come” (Luk 22:19; 1Co 11:26).

When Scripture speaks so plainly, why cannot men be content with it? Why should we mystify and confuse a subject that in the New Testament is so simple? The “continual remembrance of Christ’s death” was the one grand object for which the Lord’s Supper was ordained. He that goes further than this is adding to God’s Word, and does so to the great peril of his soul.

Now, is it reasonable to suppose that our Lord would appoint an ordinance for so simple a purpose as keeping his death in remembrance? Most certainly it is. Of all the facts in His earthly ministry, none are equal in importance to that of His death. It was the great satisfaction for man’s sin, which had been appointed in God’s covenant from

³ From *The Book of Common Prayer*, the official service book of the Church of England, compiled by Thomas Cranmer and others, first issued in 1549. One section is “The Catechism.”

the foundation of the world. It was the great atonement⁴ of almighty power, to which every sacrifice of animals, from the fall of man, continually pointed. It was the grand end and purpose for which Messiah came into the world. It was the corner-stone and foundation of all man's hopes of pardon and peace with God.

In short, Christ would have lived, taught, preached, prophesied, and wrought miracles in vain if He had not crowned all by dying for our sins as our Substitute!⁵ His death was our life. His death was the payment of our debt to God. Without His death, we should have been of all creatures most miserable. No wonder that an ordinance was specially appointed to remind us of our Savior's death. It is the very one thing of which poor, weak, sinful man needs to be continually reminded!

Does the New Testament warrant men in saying that the Lord's Supper was ordained to be a sacrifice, and that in it Christ's body and blood are present under the forms of bread and wine? Most certainly not! When the Lord Jesus said to the disciples, "This is my body" and "this is my blood" (Mat 26:26, 28), He evidently meant, "This bread in my hand is an emblem of my body, and this cup of wine in my hand contains an emblem of my blood."

The disciples were accustomed to hear Him use such language. They remembered His saying, "The field is the world...the good seed are the children of the kingdom" (Mat 13:38). It never entered into their minds that He meant to say He was holding His own body and His own blood in His hands, and literally giving them His literal body and blood to eat and drink. Not one of the writers of the New Testament ever speaks of the sacrament as a sacrifice, or calls the Lord's Table an altar, or even hints that a Christian minister is a sacrificing priest. The universal doctrine of the New Testament is that after the one offering of Christ there remains no more need of sacrifice.⁶

Does the English Prayer Book warrant any churchman⁷ in saying that the Lord's Supper was meant to be a sacrifice, and that Christ's body and blood are present under the forms of bread and wine? Once more I reply, Most certainly not! Not once is the word *altar* to be found in the Prayer Book: not once is the Lord's Supper called a sacrifice. Throughout the Communion Service, the one idea of the ordinance continually pressed on our attention is that of a remembrance of Christ's death.

As to any presence of Christ's natural body and blood under the forms of bread and wine, the rubric⁸ at the end of the Service gives the most flat and distinct contradiction

⁴ **atonement** – literally "at-one-ment"; reconciliation with God by removing or covering the guilt of sin through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. See Free Grace Broadcaster 227, *Atonement*; available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

⁵ **Substitute** – one who takes the place of another (2Co 5:21). See FGB 207, *Substitution*; available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

⁶ If anyone fancies that St. Paul's words to the Hebrews, "We have an altar" (Heb 13:10), are a proof that the Lord's table is an altar, I advise him to read what Waterland, no mean theologian, says on the subject: "Christians have an altar whereof they partake. That altar is Christ our Lord, Who is Altar, Priest, and Sacrifice, all in One" (Daniel Waterland, *Works*, Vol. 5, 268).

⁷ **churchman** – member of the Anglican Church.

⁸ **rubric** – direction for conduct of divine service.

to the idea. That rubric expressly asserts that “the natural body and blood of Christ are in heaven, and not here.” Those many churchmen, so-called, who delight in talking of the “altar,” the “sacrifice,” the “priest,” and the “real presence” in the Lord’s Supper, would do well to remember that they are using language which is entirely unused by the Church of England.⁹

The point before us is one of vast importance. Let us lay hold upon it firmly and never let it go. It is the very point on which our Reformers¹⁰ had their sharpest controversy with the Romanists,¹¹ and went to the stake rather than give way. Sooner than admit that the Lord’s Supper was a sacrifice, they cheerfully laid down their lives. To bring back the doctrine of the “real presence,” and to turn the good old English Communion into the Romish “mass,” is to pour contempt on our martyrs and to upset the first principles of the Protestant Reformation.¹² Nay, rather, it is to ignore the plain teaching of God’s Word and do dishonor to the priestly office of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Bible teaches expressly that the Lord’s Supper was ordained to be a remembrance of Christ’s body and blood, and not an offering. The Bible teaches that Christ’s vicarious¹³ death on the cross was the one perfect sacrifice for sin, which never needs to be repeated. Let us stand fast in these two great principles of the Christian faith. A clear view of the intention of the Lord’s Supper is one of the soul’s best safeguards against the delusions of modern days.

2. Who Ought to Go to the Table?

In the second place, let me try to show who ought to be communicants. What kind of persons were meant to go to the table and receive the Lord’s Supper?

It will clear the ground if I first show who ought not to be partakers of this ordinance. The ignorance that prevails on this, as well as on every part of the subject, is vast, lamentable, and appalling. If I can contribute anything that may throw light upon it, I shall feel very thankful. The principal giants whom John Bunyan describes in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*¹⁴ as dangerous to Christian pilgrims were two: Pope and Pagan. If the good old Puritan had foreseen the times we live in, he would have said something about the giant Ignorance.

⁹ J. C. Ryle remained in the Church of England his entire ministry.

¹⁰ **Reformers** – 16th century Christians, such as Martin Luther (1483-1546), John Calvin (1509-1564), and Huldrych Zwingli (1484-1531), who sought to reform errors in Roman Catholicism. Some prominent English reformers were Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556), Nicholas Ridley (c. 1500-1555), and Hugh Latimer (c. 1485/90-1555), all who suffered burning at the stake under Queen Mary I.

¹¹ **Romanists** – Roman Catholics.

¹² **Protestant Reformation** – 16th century movement led by Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and many others, which sought to return some of the erroneous beliefs and practices of the Roman Catholic Church to the truths of the Bible.

¹³ **vicarious** – substitutionary.

¹⁴ *The Pilgrim’s Progress* – classic Christian allegory written by John Bunyan (1628-1688). Part One is available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

A. Not all professing Christians

It is not right to urge all baptized persons to become communicants.¹⁵ There is such a thing as fitness and preparedness for the ordinance. It does not work like a medicine, independently of the state of mind of those who receive it. The teaching of those who press all their congregation to come to the Lord's Table, as if the coming must necessarily do everyone good, is entirely without warrant of Scripture. Nay, rather, it is teaching which is calculated to do immense harm to men's souls, and to turn the reception of the sacrament into a mere form. Ignorance can never be the mother of acceptable worship, and an ignorant communicant who comes to the Lord's Table without knowing why he comes, is altogether in the wrong place.

"Let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread and drink of that cup" (1Co 11:28). To discern "the Lord's body"—that is, to understand what the elements of bread and wine represent, and why they are appointed, and what is the particular use of remembering Christ's death—is an essential qualification of a true communicant (11:29). God commands all men everywhere to repent and believe the gospel (Act 17:30); but He does not in the same way, or in the same manner, command everybody to come to the Lord's Table. No, this thing is not to be taken in hand unadvisedly, lightly, or carelessly! It is a solemn ordinance, and solemnly it ought to be used.

B. Not sinners living in open sin

But this is not all. Sinners living in open sin and determined not to give it up ought on no account to come to the Lord's Table. To do so is a positive insult to Christ and to pour contempt on His gospel. It is nonsense to profess we desire to remember Christ's death while we cling to the accursed thing which made it needful for Christ to die. The mere fact that a man is continuing in sin is plain evidence that he does not care for Christ and feels no gratitude for redemption.

The ignorant Papist¹⁶ who goes to the priest's confessional and receives absolution,¹⁷ may think he is fit to go to the Popish mass, and after mass may return to his sins. He never reads the Bible and knows no better! But the Englishman who habitually breaks any of God's commandments and yet goes to the sacrament, as if it would do him good and wipe away his sins, is very guilty indeed. So long as he chooses to continue his wicked habits, he cannot receive the slightest benefit from Christ's ordinances, and is only adding sin to sin.

¹⁵ In Ryle's day, most of the people in England were baptized in the Anglican Church as infants; many of these were ignorant, unregenerate, and therefore unfit to participate in the Lord's Supper. We believe the New Testament teaches that only professing believers in Christ should be baptized. See *Second London Baptist Confession*, 29.2, and *Children Brought to Christ, Not to the Font* by Charles H. Spurgeon, both available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

Although we differ from his view of baptism, Ryle's comments in this section are sadly applicable to some Baptist church contexts because many are baptized upon a shallow profession of faith while remaining ignorant of the biblical gospel and showing no signs of spiritual life.

¹⁶ **Papist** – follower of the Pope; Roman Catholic.

¹⁷ **absolution** – forgiveness of sins declared by church authority.

To carry unrepented sin into Communion, and there receive the bread and wine, knowing in our own hearts that we and wickedness are yet friends, is one of the worst things a man can do—and one of the most hardening to conscience. If a man must have his sins and cannot give them up, let him by all means stay away from the Lord's Supper. There is such a thing as eating and drinking unworthily to our own damnation (1Co 11:29). To no one do these words apply so thoroughly as to an open sinner.

C. Not the self-righteous

But I have not done yet. Self-righteous people, who think that they are to be saved by their own works, have no business to come to the Lord's Table. Strange as it may sound at first, these persons are the least qualified of all to receive the sacrament. They may be outwardly correct, moral, and respectable in their lives, but so long as they trust in their own goodness for salvation, they are entirely in the wrong place at the Lord's Supper. For what do we declare at the Lord's Supper? We publicly profess that we have no goodness, righteousness, or worthiness of our own, and that all our hope is in Christ. We publicly profess that we are guilty, sinful, and corrupt, and naturally deserve God's wrath and condemnation. We publicly profess that Christ's merit and not ours, Christ's righteousness and not ours, is the alone cause why we look for acceptance with God.

Now, what has a self-righteous man to do with an ordinance like this? Clearly nothing at all. One thing, at any rate, is very plain: a self-righteous man has no business to receive the sacrament in the Church of England. The Communion Service of the Church bids all communicants declare that "they do not presume to come to the Table trusting in their own righteousness, but in God's manifold and great mercies." It tells them to say, "We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under Thy table"; "the remembrance of our sins is grievous unto us; the burden of them is intolerable." How any self-righteous churchman can ever go to the Lord's Table and take these words into his mouth passes my understanding! It only shows that many professing Christians use excellent *forms* of worship, without taking the trouble to consider what they mean.

The plain truth is that the Lord's Supper was not meant for dead souls, but for living ones. The careless, the ignorant, the willfully wicked, the self-righteous, are no more fit to come to Communion than a dead corpse is fit to sit down at a king's feast. To enjoy a spiritual feast, we must have a spiritual heart, taste, and appetite. To suppose that Christ's ordinances can do good to an unspiritual man, is as foolish as to put bread and wine into the mouth of a dead person.

The careless, the ignorant, and the willfully wicked, so long as they continue in that state, are utterly unfit to be communicants. To urge them to attend is not to do them good but harm. The Lord's Supper is not a converting or justifying ordinance. If a man goes to the Table unconverted or unforgiven, he will come away no better at all.

D. Those who have repentance, faith, and charity

But, after all, the ground having been cleared of error, the question still remains to be answered: Who are the sort of persons who ought to be communicants? I answer that question in the words of the Church Catechism. I there find the inquiry made, "What is

required of them who come to the Lord's Supper?" In reply I find it taught that people should "examine themselves whether they repent them truly of their former sins, steadfastly purposing to lead a new life"; whether they "have a lively faith in God's mercy through Christ, with a thankful remembrance of His death"; and whether they "are in charity¹⁸ with all men."

In a word, I find that a worthy communicant is one who possesses three simple marks and qualifications: repentance, faith, and charity. Does a man truly repent of sin and hate it? Does a man put his trust in Jesus Christ as his only hope of salvation? Does a man live in charity towards others? He that can truly say to each of these questions, "I do," he is a man that is scripturally qualified for the Lord's Supper. Let him come boldly. Let no barrier be put in his way. He comes up to the Bible standard of communicants. He may draw near with confidence and feel assured that the great Master of the banquet is not displeased.

Such a man's repentance may be very imperfect. Never mind! Is it real? Does he truly repent at all? His faith in Christ may be very weak. Never mind! Is it real? A penny is as truly the current coin¹⁹ of the realm, and as really stamped with the Queen's image, as a sovereign.²⁰ His charity may be very defective in quantity and degree. Never mind! Is it genuine? The grand test of a man's Christianity is not the quantity of grace he has got, but whether he has any grace at all. The first twelve communicants, when Christ Himself gave the bread and wine, were weak indeed—weak in knowledge, weak in faith, weak in courage, weak in patience, weak in love! But eleven of them had that about them which outweighed all defects: they were real, genuine, sincere, and true.

Forever let this great principle be rooted in our minds: The only worthy communicant is the man who is experientially acquainted with repentance toward God, faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ, and practical love toward others. Are you that man? Then you may draw near to the table and take the sacrament to your comfort. Lower than this, I dare not pitch my standard of a communicant. I will never help to crowd a Communion service with careless, ignorant, self-righteous attendants.

Higher than this I will not pitch my standard. I will never tell anyone to keep away till he is perfect, and to wait till his heart is as unruffled as an angel's. I will not do so because I believe that neither my Master nor His apostles would have done so. Show me a man that really feels his sins, really leans on Christ, really struggles to be holy, and I will bid him welcome in my Master's name. He may feel weak, erring, empty, feeble, doubting, wretched, and poor. What matter? St. Paul, I believe, would have received him as a right communicant, and I will do likewise.

¹⁸ **charity** – love.

¹⁹ **current coin** – money used in a country's official exchange.

²⁰ **sovereign** – British gold coin minted from 1489-1932, equal in value to one pound.

3. What May Communicants Expect?

In the third place, let us consider what benefit communicants may expect to get by going to the Table and attending the Lord's Supper. This is a point of grave importance and one on which vast mistakes abound. On no point, perhaps, connected with this ordinance, are the views of Christians so vague and misty and undefined.

A. What not to expect

One common idea among men is that "taking the sacrament must do them good." Why? They cannot explain. What good? They cannot exactly say. But they have a loose general notion that it is the right thing to be a communicant, and that somehow or other it is of service to their souls! This is, of course, nothing better than ignorance. It is unreasonable to suppose that such communicants can please Christ, or receive any real benefit from what they do.

If there is any principle clearly laid down in the Bible about any act of religious worship, it is this: that it must be intelligent. The worshipper must at least understand something about what he is doing. Mere bodily worship, unaccompanied by mind or heart, is utterly worthless. The man who goes to Communion, and eats the bread and drinks the wine as a mere matter of form because his minister tells him, without any clear idea of what it all means, derives no benefit. He might as well just stay at home!

Another common idea among men is that, "taking the sacrament will help them to heaven, and take away their sins." To this delusive idea you may trace up the habit in some parishes of going to the sacrament once a year, in order, as an old farmer once said, "to wipe off the year's sins." To this idea, again, you may trace the too common practice of sending for a minister in time of sickness, in order to receive the sacrament before death. Alas, how many take comfort about their relatives, after they have lived a most ungodly life, for no better reason than this, that they took the sacrament when they were dying! Whether they repented and believed and had new hearts, they neither seem to know or care. All they know is that "they took the sacrament before they died." My heart sinks within me when I hear people resting on such evidence as this.

Ideas like these are mournful proofs of the ignorance that fills the minds of men about the Lord's Supper. They are ideas for which there is not the slightest warrant in Scripture...The sooner they are cast aside and given up, the better for the Church and the world.

Let us settle it firmly in our minds that the Lord's Supper was not given to be a means either of justification²¹ or of conversion.²² It was never meant to give grace where there is no grace already, or to provide pardon when pardon is not already enjoyed. It

²¹ **justification** – Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein He pardons all our sins and accepts us as righteous in His sight—only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us and received by faith alone. (*Spurgeon's Catechism*, Q. 32) See Free Grace Broadcaster 187, *Justification*; both available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

²² See *Do You Think You Are Converted?* by Ryle, available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

cannot possibly supply the absence of “repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ” (Act 20:21).

B. What to expect

It is an ordinance for the penitent, not for the impenitent; for the believing, not for the unbelieving; for the converted, not for the unconverted. The unconverted man, who fancies that he can find a short-cut road to heaven by taking the sacrament without treading the well-worn steps of repentance and faith, will find to his cost one day that he is totally deceived. The Lord’s Supper was meant to increase and help the grace that a man has, but not to impart the grace that he has not. It was certainly never intended to make our peace with God, to justify, or to convert.

The simplest statement of the benefit which a truehearted communicant may expect to receive from the Lord’s Supper is that which is supplied by the Church Catechism: “The strengthening and refreshing of our souls.” Clearer views of Christ and His atonement, clearer views of all the offices that Christ fills as our Mediator²³ and Advocate, clearer views of the complete redemption Christ has obtained for us by His vicarious death on the cross, clearer views of our full and perfect acceptance in Christ before God, fresh reasons for deep repentance for sin, fresh reasons for lively faith—these are among the leading returns that a believer may confidently expect to get from his attendance at the Lord’s Table. He that eats the bread and drinks the wine in a right spirit, will find himself drawn into closer communion with Christ, and will feel to know Him more and understand Him better.

1). *Humility*. Right reception of the Lord’s Supper has a humbling effect on the soul. The sight of these emblems of Christ’s body and blood reminds us how sinful sin must be, if nothing less than the death of God’s own Son could make satisfaction for it or redeem us from its guilt. Never surely ought we to be so “clothed with humility” as when we are at Communion.

2). *Cheer*. Right reception of the Lord’s Supper has a cheering effect on the soul. The sight of the bread broken and the wine poured out reminds us how full, perfect, and complete is our salvation. Those lively emblems remind us what an enormous price has been paid for our redemption. They press on us the mighty truth that, believing on Christ, we have nothing to fear because a sufficient payment has been made for our debt. The “precious blood of Christ” answers every charge that can be brought against us (1Pe 1:19). God can “be just,” and yet be “the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus” (Rom 3:26).

3). *Holiness*. Right reception of the Lord’s Supper has a sanctifying effect on the soul. The bread and wine remind us how great is our debt of gratitude to our Lord, and how thoroughly we are bound to live for Him Who died for our sins. They seem to say to

²³ **Mediator** – *literally*: “one who goes between.” It pleased God in His eternal purpose to choose and ordain the Lord Jesus, His only begotten Son...to be the Mediator between God and man; the prophet, priest and king; head and savior of his church, the heir of all things, and judge of the world. (*Second London Baptist Confession*, 8.1) See also Free Grace Broadcaster 183, *Christ the Mediator*; both available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

us, “Remember what Christ has done for you, and ask yourself whether there is anything too great to do for Him.”

4). *Restraint*. Right reception of the Lord’s Supper into hearts has a restraining effect on the soul. Every time a believer goes to Communion, he is reminded what a serious thing it is to be a Christian, and what an obligation is laid on him to lead a consistent life. Bought with such a price as that bread and wine call to his recollection, ought he not to glorify Christ in body and spirit, which are His (1Co 6:20)? The man that goes regularly and intelligently to the Lord’s Table finds it increasingly hard to yield to sin and conform to the world.

C. Summary

Such is a brief account of the benefits that a right-hearted communicant may expect to receive from the Lord’s Supper. In eating that bread and drinking that cup, such a man will have his repentance deepened, his faith increased, his knowledge enlarged, his habit of holy living strengthened. He will realize more of the “real presence” of Christ in his heart. Eating that bread by faith, he will feel closer communion with the body of Christ. Drinking that wine by faith, he will feel closer communion with the blood of Christ.

He will see more clearly what Christ is to him and what he is to Christ. He will understand more thoroughly what it is to be one with Christ, and Christ one with him. He will feel the roots of his soul’s spiritual life watered, and the work of grace in his heart established, built up, and carried forward. All these things may seem and sound foolishness to a natural man, but to a true Christian these things are light, health, life, and peace. No wonder that a true Christian finds the Lord’s Supper a source of blessing!

Remember, I do not pretend to say that all Christians experience the full blessing of the Lord’s Supper, which I have just attempted to describe. Nor yet do I say that the same believer will always find his soul in the same spiritual frame, and always receive the same amount of benefit from the sacrament. But this I will boldly say: you will rarely find a true believer who will not say that he reckons the Lord’s Supper one of his best helps and highest privileges. He will tell you that if he were deprived of the Lord’s Supper, he should find the loss of it a great drawback to his soul. There are some things of which we never know the value till they are taken from us. So I believe it is with the Lord’s Supper. The weakest and humblest of God’s children gets a blessing from this sacrament, to an extent of which he is not aware.

4. Why Do Many Never Come?

In the last place, I have to consider why it is that many so-called Christians never come to the Lord’s Supper.

It is a simple matter of fact that myriads of baptized persons never come to the Table of the Lord. They would not endure to be told that they deny the faith and are practically not in communion with Christ. When they worship, they attend a place of Christian worship; when they hear religious teaching, it is the teaching of Christianity; when they

are married, they use a Christian service; when their children are baptized, they ask for the sacrament of baptism. Yet all this time they never come to the Lord's Supper!

They often live on in this state of mind for many years, and to all appearance are not ashamed. They often die in this condition without ever having received the sacrament, and yet profess to feel hope at the last, and their friends express a hope about them. And yet they live and die in open disobedience to a plain command of Christ! These are simple facts. Let anyone look around him and deny them if he can. I challenge anyone to deny that the non-communicants in all English congregations form the majority, and the communicants the minority, of the worshippers.

Now, how is this? What account can we give of it? Our Lord Jesus Christ's last injunctions to His disciples are clear, plain, and unmistakable. He says to all, "Eat...drink"; "this do ye...in remembrance of me" (1Co 11:24-25). Did He leave it to our discretion whether we would attend to His injunction or not? Did He mean that it did not signify whether His disciples did or did not keep up the ordinance He had just established? Certainly not! The very idea is absurd, and one certainly never dreamed of in apostolic times.

St. Paul evidently takes it for granted that every Christian is a communicant. A class of Christian worshippers who never came to the Table was a class whose existence was unknown to him. What, then, are we to say of that large multitude of non-communicants which walks out of our churches every Communion Sunday, unabashed, unhumbled, not afraid, not the least ashamed? Why is it? How is it? What does it all mean? Let us look these questions fairly in the face and endeavor to give an answer to them.

A. Careless ignorance

For one thing, many are not communicants because they are utterly careless and thoughtless about religion, and ignorant of the very first principles of Christianity. They go to church as a matter of form, because other people go; but they neither know nor care anything about what is done at church! The faith of Christ has no place either in their hearts, heads, consciences, wills, or understandings. It is a mere affair of "words and names," about which they know no more than Festus or Gallio (Act 25:9-12; 18:12-17).

There were very few such Christians in St. Paul's times, if indeed there were any. There are far too many in these last days of the world, when everything seems to be wearing out and running to seed. They are the dead-weight of the churches and the scandal of Christianity. What such people need is light, knowledge, grace, a renewed conscience, a changed heart. In their present state they have no part or lot in Christ; and, dying in this state, they are unfit for heaven. Do I wish them to come to the Lord's Supper? Certainly not, till they are converted. Except a man be converted, he will never enter the kingdom of God.

B. Habitual sin

For another thing, many are not communicants because they know they are living in the habitual practice of some sin, or in the habitual neglect of some Christian duty. Their conscience tells them that so long as they live in this state and do not break off from their sins, they are unfit to come to the Table of the Lord. Well, they are so far quite right! I wish no man to be a communicant if he cannot give up his sins.

But I warn these people not to forget that if they are unfit for the Lord's Supper, they are unfit to die, and that if they die in their present condition they will be lost eternally. The same sins that disqualify them for the sacrament, most certainly disqualify them for heaven. Do I want them to come to the Lord's Supper as they are? Certainly not! But I do want them to repent and be converted, to cease to do evil, and to break off from their sins. Forever let it be remembered that *the man unfit for the Lord's Supper is unfit to die*.

C. Fear of responsibility

For another thing, some are not communicants because they fancy it will add to their responsibility. They are not, as many, ignorant and careless about religion. They even attend regularly on the means of grace²⁴ and like the preaching of the gospel. But they say they dread coming forward and making a profession. They fear that they might afterwards fall away and bring scandal on the cause of Christianity. They think it wisest to be on the safe side and not commit themselves at all.

Such people would do well to remember that if they avoid responsibility of one kind by not coming to the Lord's Table, they incur responsibility of another kind, quite as grave, and quite as injurious to the soul. They are responsible for open disobedience to a command of Christ. They are shrinking from doing that which their Master continually enjoins on His disciples, from confessing Him before men.

No doubt it is a serious step to come forward and receive the sacrament. It is a step that none should take lightly and without self-examination. But it is no less a serious step to walk away and refuse the ordinance, when we remember Who invites us to receive it and for what purpose it was appointed!

I warn the people I am now dealing with to take heed what they are doing. Let them not flatter themselves that it can ever be a wise, a prudent, a safe line of conduct to neglect a plain command of Christ. They may find at length, to their cost, that they have only increased their guilt and forsaken their mercies.

D. Sense of unworthiness

For another thing, some are not communicants because they fancy they are not yet worthy. They wait and stand still, under the mistaken notion that no one is qualified for the Lord's Supper unless he feels within him something like perfection. They pitch their

²⁴ **means of grace** – instruments that God is pleased to use in order to accomplish salvation and sanctification in the hearts of men: the preaching of the Word, Bible reading and study, prayer, baptism, the Lord's Supper, and fellowship with other believers.

idea of a communicant so high that they despair of attaining to it. Waiting for inward perfection they live, and waiting for it too often they die.

Now, such persons would do well to understand that they are completely mistaken in their estimate of what “worthiness” really is. They are forgetting that the Lord’s Supper was not intended for unsinning angels, but for men and women compassed with infirmity, dwelling in a world full of temptations, and needing mercy and grace every day they live. A sense of our own utter unworthiness is the best worthiness we can bring to Communion. A deep feeling of our own entire indebtedness to Christ for all we have and hope for is the best feeling we can bring with us.

The people I now have in view ought to consider seriously whether the ground they have taken up is tenable,²⁵ and whether they are not standing in their own light. If they are waiting till they feel in themselves perfect hearts, perfect motives, perfect feelings, perfect repentance, perfect love, perfect faith—they will wait forever. There never were such communicants in any age, certainly not in the days of our Lord and of the apostles; there never will be as long as the world stands.

Nay, rather, the very thought that we feel literally worthy is a symptom of secret self-righteousness, and proves us unfit for communion in God’s sight. Sinners we are when we first come to the throne of grace; sinners we shall be till we die—converted, changed, renewed, sanctified, but sinners still. In short, no man is a really worthy communicant who does not deeply feel that he is a miserable sinner.

E. Discouragement from others’ bad examples

In the last place, some object to be communicants because they see others coming to the Lord’s Table who are not worthy and not in a right state of mind. Because others eat and drink unworthily, they refuse to eat and drink at all. Of all the grounds taken up by non-communicants to justify their own neglect of Christ’s ordinance, I must plainly say, I know none that seems to me so foolish, so weak, so unreasonable, and so unscriptural as this. It is as good as saying that we will never receive the Lord’s Supper at all! When shall we ever find a body of communicants on earth of which all the members are converted?

It is setting up ourselves in the most unhealthy attitude of judging others. “Who art thou that judgest another?” (Jam 4:12). “What is that to thee? Follow thou me” (Joh 21:22). It is depriving ourselves of a great privilege merely because others profane²⁶ it and make a bad use of it. It is pretending to be wiser than our Master Himself. If the words of St. Luke mean anything, Judas Iscariot was present at the first Communion and received the bread and wine among others.

It is taking up ground for which there is no warrant in Scripture. St. Paul rebukes the Corinthians sharply for the irreverent behavior of some of the communicants; but I cannot find him giving a single hint that, when some came to the Table unworthily, others ought to draw back or stay away.

²⁵ **tenable** – defensible.

²⁶ **profane** – make common, versus upholding what is sacred.

Let me advise the non-communicants I have now in view to beware of being wise above that which was written. Let them study the parable of the Wheat and Tares, and mark how both were to “grow together until the harvest” (Mat 13:30). Perfect churches, perfect congregations, perfect bodies of communicants, are all unattainable in this world of confusion and sin. Let us covet the best gifts, and do all we can to check sin in others; but let us not starve our own selves because others are ignorant sinners, and turn their meat into poison. If others are foolish enough to eat and drink unworthily, let us not turn our backs on Christ’s ordinance and refuse to eat and drink at all.

F. No excuses valid

Such are the five common excuses why myriads in the present day, though professing themselves Christians, never come to the Lord’s Supper. One common remark may be made about them: there is not a single reason among the five that deserves to be called “good,” and which does not condemn the man who gives it. I challenge anyone to deny this. I have said repeatedly that I want no one to be a communicant who is not properly qualified. But I ask those who stay away never to forget that the very reasons they assign for their conduct are their condemnation. I tell them that they stand convicted before God of either being very ignorant of what a communicant is and what the Lord’s Supper is; or else of being persons who are not living rightly, and are unfit to die.

In short, to say “I am a non-communicant” is as good as saying one of three things:

- “I am living in sin, and cannot come.”
- “I know Christ commands me, but I will not obey Him.”
- “I am an ignorant man, and do not understand what the Lord’s Supper means.”

Conclusion

I know not in what state of mind this may find the reader of this paper, or what his opinions may be about the Lord’s Supper. But I will conclude the whole subject by offering to all some warnings, which I venture to think are peculiarly required by the times.

A. Do not neglect the Lord’s Supper. The man who coolly and deliberately refuses to use an ordinance that the Lord Jesus Christ appointed for his profit, may be very sure that his soul is in a very wrong state. There is a judgment yet to come; there is an account to be rendered of all our conduct on earth. How anyone can look forward to that day and expect to meet Christ with comfort and in peace, if he has refused all his life to meet Christ in His own ordinance, is a thing that I cannot understand. Does this come home to you? Mind what you are doing.

B. Do not receive the Lord’s Supper carelessly, irreverently, and as a matter of form. The man who goes to Communion, and eats the bread and drinks the wine while his heart is far away, is committing a great sin and robbing himself of a great blessing. In this, as in every other means of grace, everything depends on the state of mind in which the ordinance is used. He that draws near without repentance, faith, and love, and with a heart full of sin and the world, will certainly be nothing better, but rather worse. Does this come home to you? Mind what you are about.

C. Do not make an idol of the Lord's Supper. The man who tells you that it is the first, foremost, chief, and principal ordinance in Christianity, is telling you that which he will find it hard to prove. In the great majority of the books of the New Testament, the Lord's Supper is not even named. In the letters to Timothy and Titus, about a minister's duties, the subject is not even mentioned. To repent and be converted, to believe and be holy, to be born again and have grace in our hearts—all these things are of far more importance than to be a communicant. Without them, we cannot be saved. Without the Lord's Supper, we can. The penitent thief was not a communicant, and Judas Iscariot was! Are you tempted to make the Lord's Supper override and overshadow everything in Christianity, and place it above prayer and preaching? Take care. Mind what you are about.

D. Do not use the Lord's Supper irregularly. Never be absent when this ordinance is administered. Make every sacrifice to be in your place. Regular habits are essential to the maintenance of the health of our bodies. Regular use of every means of grace is essential to the prosperity of our souls. The man who finds it a weariness to attend on every occasion when the Lord's Table is spread may well doubt whether all is right within him, and whether he is ready for the Marriage Supper of the Lamb.²⁷ If Thomas had not been absent when the Lord appeared the first time to the assembled disciples, he would not have said the foolish things he did. Absence made him miss a blessing. Does this come home to you? Mind what you are about.

E. Do not do anything to bring discredit on your profession as a communicant. The man who after attending the Lord's Table runs into sin does more harm perhaps than any sinner. He is a walking sermon on behalf of the devil. He gives occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme. He helps to keep people away from Christ. Lying, drinking, adulterous, dishonest, passionate communicants are the helpers of the devil, and the worst enemies of the gospel. Does this come home to you? Mind what you are about.

F. Do not despair if you do not receive the good you expect. In the last place, do not despond and be cast down, if with all your desires you do not feel to get great good from the Lord's Supper. Very likely you are expecting too much. Very likely you are a poor judge of your own state. Your soul's roots may be strengthening and growing, while you think you are not getting on. Very likely you are forgetting that earth is not heaven, and that here we walk by faith and not by sight, and must expect nothing perfect (2Co 5:7). Lay these things to heart. Do not write bitter things against yourself without cause.

To every reader into whose hands this paper may fall, I commend the whole subject of it as deserving of serious and solemn consideration. I am nothing better than a poor fallible man myself. But if I have made up my mind on any point it is this: that there is no truth which demands such plain speaking as truth about the Lord's Supper.



²⁷ See *The Marriage of the Lamb* by Charles H. Spurgeon, available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.