

The Pastoral Necessity of Requiring Church Membership for Communion

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December 27th, 2025

Introduction

The scriptures warn us in 1 Corinthians 11:27 of the consequences of misusing the Lord's Supper: "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord." This warning must be read alongside the duty of local elders to "shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight" (1 Peter 5:2a). This has led the Reformed Faith to clearly articulate the duty of fencing the table, that is, making plain at each administration of the Supper who should and should not partake, and why.

The Westminster Larger Catechism asks and answers saying "May any who profess the faith, and desire to come to the Lord's supper, be kept from it? A. Such as are found to be ignorant or scandalous, notwithstanding their profession of the faith, and desire to come to the Lord's supper, may and ought to be kept from that sacrament, by the power which Christ hath left in his church, until they receive instruction, and manifest their reformation," (WLC 173). The PCA's *Book of Church Order*, following the pattern of the old PCUS¹ adds specifics to this saying "Since, by our Lord's appointment, this Sacrament sets forth the Communion of Saints, the minister, at the discretion of the Session, before the observance begins, may either invite all those who profess the true religion, and are communicants in good standing in any evangelical church, to participate in the ordinance; or may invite those who have been approved by the Session, after having given indication of their desire to participate," (PCA BCO 58-4).

Although all participants are required to examine themselves, the Reformed tradition has never treated self-examination as the primary gatekeeping mechanism.² Rather, it has been the

¹ "Chapter 58: The Administration of the Lord's Supper, Paragraph 4: Fencing the Table," PCA Historical Center, accessed December 27, 2025, <https://www.pcahistory.org/bco/dfw/58/04.html>.

² William Shishko, "Restricted Communion in One OPC Congregation," *Ordained Servant* 3, no. 4 (November 1994): 77. Shishko argues that "The Westminster Standards do not teach that people admit themselves to the Lord's Supper, but that they are to 'be admitted' to it".

duty of the local session to admit communicants to the Lord's Table. For members, this process is straightforward, since all communicant members are interviewed and approved by the session. For non-members and long term visitors, however, it becomes complex. The session must either verify the individual's membership in good standing in another evangelical church or withhold admission to the Table until the individual has joined a church.

Pastorally, this is not a pleasant task. When someone wants to take communion, that is a glorious and wonderful thing and shepherds rightly rejoice to see it. Yet, a desire to take communion does not, by itself, establish fitness to take communion. The scriptures clearly warn us against situations where men and women will partake unworthily and the result will be their eating and drinking to their own great harm (1 Corinthians 11:27-30). In light of that, this paper will seek to defend the following, fencing the communion table by requiring church membership is the necessary outworking of three biblical truths: credible profession requires submission to Christ's appointed shepherds, the Lord's Supper is a covenant meal for the visible covenant community, and Christ has given His elders the keys of the kingdom to guard His flock from profaning His table. This is the position explicitly stated in our BCO and required of all sessions, but rather than taking it for granted I want to unpack biblically, theologically, and practically why the church has adopted this position and why it is important for us to maintain it.

This will be examined in three parts: Credible profession, The Covenant Meal, and The Duty of Elders.

Credible Profession

The foundational issue is what constitutes a credible profession of faith.³ Sessions are required to exercise discernment and oversight in this area. The BCO gives sessions two options: they may either admit those who are communicant members in good standing in other churches to participate or personally examine those seeking admission.⁴ In other words, the institutional church, either locally or more broadly, must judge the credibility of the potential communicant's profession of faith before admitting him to the Table. For most in the world, the profession of faith is a personal matter that takes place at one point in time. That once you have decided to be a Christian, you are and remain one until you change your mind. The reformed faith has a different conception of what constitutes a profession of faith.

At its core, a credible profession of faith is a personal belief in Jesus. Romans 10:9-10 "if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved." Yet, the scriptures have always intimately tied this internal belief with the necessity of outward action, simply put "repent and believe." Mark 1:14-15 "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." Repentance is the evidence of true faith because faith requires action. James puts this starkly in James 2:17 saying "So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead."

³ "One cannot love Christ and eschew His bride. The credible profession of persons unwilling to unite to Christ's Church must be questioned. Any sinful unwillingness to unite with Christ's people should be addressed pastorally (Hebrews 10:25; 1 Corinthians 10:16-17). Those unwilling to unite to Christ's Church are outside the visible body of Christ." PCA Ad Interim Committee, "Report on Fencing the Lord's Table," in *PCA Digest: Position Papers, 1973-1993* (Atlanta: Presbyterian Church in America, 1990), 299.

⁴ In common terms, the PCA permits both open communion (admitting communicant members in good standing from other evangelical churches) and close communion (admitting only members of the local congregation), but not closed communion (restricting participation to a single denomination). This paper addresses a position that goes further still, the common belief that no church may require membership in *any* church as a prerequisite for admission to the Lord's Table. Such "very open" communion is explicitly prohibited by BCO 58-4.

A credible profession of faith requires more than just words, it requires a change in lifestyle and action. James Bannerman puts it like this “A visible profession of belief in the Gospel—comprehending under the word profession not only the confession of the lips, but also a corresponding life and conduct—is the single qualification necessary to rank a man a member of the visible Church of Christ.”⁵ If someone professes faith in God but continues to walk unrepentantly in the works of the flesh (Galatians 5:19-21) it is obvious that there is either a lack of understanding about what the gospel requires or a lack of true faith. In either case more would be required to accept their profession as credible. Morton Smith says “Membership in the Church as visible must be determined by the external profession of faith. Since the Church visible does not possess the means of determining whether there is genuine faith or not, all that can be judged is the credibility of the profession of the faith, including not only the confession of the lips, but also a corresponding life of Christian conduct.”⁶ The Shorter Catechism sums it up beautifully in Question 87 “Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience.” Credible profession of faith requires repentance, and repentance necessitates ongoing obedience. But what is the nature of this obedience? It is nothing less than submission to Christ as Lord.

When you make a profession of faith you are promising to obey and submit to Christ as Lord. The New Testament warns extensively over the dangers of professing Christ as Lord with your lips but not following Him out of your heart. Matthew 7:21–23 “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your

⁵ James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ: A Treatise on the Nature, Powers, Ordinances, Discipline, and Government of the Christian Church*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1868), 59.

⁶ Morton H. Smith, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 & 2 (E4 Group, 2016), 564.

name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'"1 John 2:3–6 says "And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked." Credible profession requires evidence of heart obedience to Christ as Lord.

One of Christ's clear commands in scripture is to be a part of and in submission to His church. We must worship the Lord and do so regularly (Exodus 20:8-11). This worship must be corporate, as Hebrews 10:24-25 says "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near." The New Testament expands on this very broadly with a wide range of "one another" commands, none of which can be carried out casually but which require formal, ongoing relationships.⁷ These commands do not limit our loyalty, love, and obligation to just a local congregation, but it is impossible to fully carry them out without connection to a local congregation. The New Testament assumes a defined local body of worshippers who knew each other and were bound together in worship and fellowship.

These local congregations are not a collection of autonomous individuals but are flocks of God under the authority of elected and installed elders. Hebrews 13:17 says "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to

⁷ "A solitary Christian is worse than a contradiction, he is an anomaly, standing out against the express institution of God, which has appointed the fellowship of believers in one Church, and made provision in its outward ordinances for their union and edification. The Christian society is a kingdom, set up by express Divine appointment, and differs from every other society on earth in this remarkable fact, that the builder and maker of it is God." Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, 1:18.

give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you." It is impossible to submit to your leaders if you don't have leaders. Acts 20:28 and 1 Peter 5:2 expand on this, making clear that elders are responsible not for all Christians everywhere but the flock of God that is among them. That is local congregations who are bound to that local body and which has its own elected and ordained leadership. Church membership is biblical. Moreover, this membership is tied to a local congregation with local leadership.

Some may object saying, "Scripture teaches that we are justified by faith alone, not by works or institutional membership. The thief on the cross was saved without baptism, church membership, or submission to elders. Paul writes that 'if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved' (Romans 10:9), he says nothing about joining a local congregation." We are justified by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, but the thief on the cross is an example of deathbed conversion, not normative Christian discipleship. Had he survived, he would have come down, been baptized, and joined a local church. This is the consistent pattern we see in Acts. The objection confuses what is necessary for justification with what constitutes credible profession. Church membership does not, by itself, save anyone. But a refusal to submit to Christ's church reveals something about whether one is truly submitting to Christ as Lord. The unified voice of the New Testament assumes that Christians will belong to identifiable local congregations under appointed leadership. Nowhere in the Old or New Testaments is faithful Christian living ever portrayed as possible outside of the covenant community that God has established.⁸ Imagine a man going into an army recruiting station and politely informing them that he desires all of the

⁸ Waters, Guy Prentiss, *How Jesus Runs the Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2011), 18. Waters observes: "Paul simply does not envision, here or anywhere else, free-floating Christians flitting from one congregation to the next. He assumes that Christians exist in the committed relationships that church membership solemnizes."

rights and privileges and duties of a soldier, but he doesn't want to be under anyone's authority. He has made a good start, but he has fundamentally misunderstood the military in a way that must be corrected before he could serve. There is no such thing as an independent Christian in the same way that there is no such thing as an independent soldier. Being under authority is inherent to both callings.

If credible profession requires acknowledging Christ as Lord and Christ commands submission to church leaders, then it is impossible to have a credible profession of faith while refusing to submit to the authority of the local church. Christianity without church membership is a theological contradiction. To be clear, it is not an error that necessarily damns you, but it is an error that separates you from the rights and privileges of the visible church. It reveals you to be among those 'found ignorant' according to WLC 173 and of those who are failing to discern the Body (1 Corinthians 11:27-29). This is not sessional overreach but rebellion on the part of the individual as it relates to the church and its privileges. You can appeal a court's ruling, but if you refuse to acknowledge the court's jurisdiction altogether, you've placed yourself outside the legal process and its protections. No Christian can declare themselves a sovereign citizen and expect the rights and privileges of the visible church. If a session is a legitimate authority then a session that requires membership can rightly require membership on the basis of the scriptures and exclude from the privileges of the visible church those who won't submit.

Which leads to the question: who is the Lord's Supper for?

The Covenant Meal

In the Old Covenant there were clear boundaries for who could and could not partake of the sacraments of that covenant. In relation to the Old Covenant meal, the Passover, Exodus 12 clearly draws lines of who is to be admitted. As Verse 47 states plainly, "All the congregation of

Israel shall keep it." The Passover was a meal for God's people. Yet, the people of God have always been called to be a missionary people and so God anticipates a circumstance where non-Israelites may be present and desire to eat of the Passover. The answer was not to lower the bar, but to hold them to the same standard as ethnic Jews. Verses 48-49 "If a stranger shall sojourn with you and would keep the Passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised. Then he may come near and keep it; he shall be as a native of the land. But no uncircumcised person shall eat of it. There shall be one law for the native and for the stranger who sojourns among you." There is one standard for the native and stranger, full admission into the Lord's people or not.⁹ They must be a part of the visible church and bear the marks of membership in the covenant community through the appropriate sacrament of inclusion. It was not a meal for the world at large; it was a meal of communion with God and with their fellow believers.

We see this same pattern in the new covenant, Acts 2:41–42 "So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." They first received the Word, then were baptized and were added to the covenant community, from this foundation they devoted themselves to all of the blessings of life in the covenant, including the Lord's Supper. Dabney puts it like this "In the great commission, we are taught that discipleship is formally constituted by baptism (Matt. 28:19. In Acts 2:41, language is used which plainly shows that the baptism of the three thousand was equivalent to their being added to the Church."¹⁰ The new covenant does not get rid of covenant boundaries, it fulfills them.

⁹ The Lord's Supper differs from circumcision in one key aspect, children were passive recipients of the Passover meal in their families, but they are not to partake of the Lord's Supper until they are old enough to discern the Lord's body. The sign of covenant inclusion was still the deciding factor, but there is not a one to one correspondence.

¹⁰ Dabney, R. L., *Systematic Theology* (1878), sec. 7, chap. 41.

We see this applied starkly in the New Testament. Jesus teaches in Luke 22:20 "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood." In Acts 20:28 this is further clarified in the exhortation to overseers "to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood." If the Lord's Supper is a participation in the body and blood of Christ, then it is clear that His body was broken for His people and His blood was shed for His people.

Indeed, this is an element of the sign that was strengthened and clarified from the Old Covenant to the New. In the Old Covenant believers had to be members of the covenant community, but they ate in private households. In the new covenant the Lord's Supper is enjoyed as an element of public worship. The whole church has become "...the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth," (1 Timothy 3:15). The sacrament is not just for His people as individuals but His people as the corporate Body of Christ. The first Lord's Supper was instituted during a Passover celebration, showing both the continuity and discontinuity of the sacrament. It was a fully new thing, instituted in the midst of an old covenant sacrament, but both showing the covenant nature of each meal. The covenant meal requires covenant community. The Lord's Supper is His gift to His church as the church. Throughout the New Testament the sacrament is never seen outside of corporate worship. It is never seen as the act of individual Christians but as the body corporately. 1 Corinthians 10:16-17 says "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread." WLC 168 finishes its definition of the Lord's Supper, making explicit that it is for "their mutual love and fellowship each with other, as members of the same mystical body." It is a gift for the whole body to strengthen the whole body.

But, even here the stark simplicity of the new covenant gives an important principle. The Lord's Supper is for the body of Christ as the body, but it is not for all members of the covenant indiscriminately. There is a requirement that they be able to examine themselves and to discern the body. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 11:27-29 "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself." We need to look at what it means to discern the body in two parts: the sacraments as His body and the church as His body.¹¹

First, to discern the body means to recognize that the bread and wine is no longer a common thing, but has been consecrated as the body and blood of Christ given for us. The Spiritual reality of the sacrament is utterly necessary to understanding what it is. The Corinthian church was treating the Lord's Supper as a common meal, eating and drinking without reverence for God or respect for the brethren. To fail to discern Christ's body in the sacrament is to treat sacred things as profane.

But second, "the body" in this passage also refers to the church itself. Paul makes this explicit just chapters earlier in 1 Corinthians 10:17, "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread." The very act of partaking together makes us one body. In the language of our standards, the Lord's Supper is "to be a bond and pledge of their communion with him, and with each other, as members of his mystical body," (WCF 29.1). To fail to discern the body is also to fail to recognize the church as the body of

¹¹ Thiselton surveys several traditions and finds agreement that the primary focus of discernment is Christ crucified, but that this generates social implications: "the social is founded on the salvific." Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 893-894.

Christ, to claim unity with Christ while refusing unity with His people. This creates a profound theological problem for the person who desires to partake of the Lord's Supper while refusing to join Christ's church: you cannot be united to the Head while deliberately severing yourself from the Body.

When we think of those who are unable to take the Lord's Supper our minds quickly jump to those who have been excommunicated. While there is no debate that the church has the duty to cast out the notoriously unrepentant sinner this is actually a cutting off from the blessings of the Covenant. Their baptism no longer entitles them to the rights of covenant but stands as a testimony against them. But there are members in good standing of the covenant community who are unable to partake of the Lord's Supper without it being any sort of punishment, young children. The Larger Catechism addresses this in 177, saying "The sacraments of baptism and the Lord's supper differ, in that baptism is to be administered but once, with water, to be a sign and seal of our regeneration and ingrafting into Christ, and that even to infants; whereas the Lord's supper is to be administered often, in the elements of bread and wine, to represent and exhibit Christ as spiritual nourishment to the soul, and to confirm our continuance and growth in him, and that only to such as are of years and ability to examine themselves."

It is a covenant meal, but it is not a meal for all members of the covenant indiscriminately, but only those such as are of years and ability to examine themselves. Those who eat and drink without that ability eat and drink judgment on themselves. Inherent in this prohibition is the necessity of external oversight. The one person completely unable to determine their own ability to discern the body is the person themselves.¹² An infant who is, wrongly,

¹² G. I. Williamson, "On a More Adequate Fencing of the Lord's Table," *Ordained Servant* 3, no. 4 (November 1994): 75. Williamson writes: "Reliance on the word of warning from the pulpit, and on that alone, fails—in the second place—because it assumes competence to judge spiritual matters on the part of those who are complete strangers. It is our conviction, on the contrary, that Sessions would be closer to the truth (in the present-day U.S., at least) if they assumed the opposite, unless—and until—they have obtained adequate information. To express it

handed the Lord's Supper has no understanding of what is happening to them. So children are also excluded, but that shows that exclusion from participation is not inherently punishment. The Lord by no means condemns or punishes the child by barring him from the table; rather, He blesses him by preventing participation in something from which he cannot, in fact, benefit. This parallels the experience of Old Testament saints who lived under instruction while longing for the fulfillment of the promises, which, in the child's case, means profession of faith and admission to full communicant membership. So if it is a biblically commanded loving-kindness to prevent children from partaking of the Lord's Supper until they can make a credible profession of faith, is the same not true of adults? Indeed the BCO makes it clear "Those only who have made a profession of faith in Christ, have been baptized, and admitted by the Session to the Lord's Table, are entitled to all the rights and privileges of the church" (BCO 6-4).

Some may object saying, "It's the Lord's Table, not the church's. Christ Himself issued the invitation, 'Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden' (Matthew 11:28), and He rebuked the Pharisees for binding heavy burdens on others. Moreover, Paul places responsibility for examination on the individual: 'Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup' (1 Corinthians 11:28). Paul does not say, 'Let the elders examine him.'" The Church is the Lord's Body, and He has given officers to that church to oversee it. To say "It's the Lord's Table, not the church's" creates a false dichotomy. Christ rules His Table through His church. The invitation of Matthew 11:28 is glorious, but it is an invitation to come to Christ, not an invitation to the Lord's Supper. Those who came to Christ in Acts were baptized, added to the church, and then devoted themselves to the breaking of bread (Acts 2:41-42). The pattern is consistent: come to Christ, join His people, then share in the covenant meal. Regarding

another way, our present practice does not do justice to the profound ignorance of many nominal Christians in present-day North American."

self-examination: Paul's instruction that a man examine himself does not exclude the oversight of elders. Self-examination and elder oversight are complementary, not contradictory. Recall the fruits of self-examination in this very passage when some were sick and dying because they partook unworthily (1 Corinthians 11:30). Self-examination alone was not sufficient to protect them. How can a shepherd be responsible for a sheep that refuses to commit to the fold? Inclusion in the covenant community requires commitment to the covenant community. This by no means excludes temporary visitors from other churches, but does exclude those who will not commit to the oversight of any local church. The church can be broad and evangelical in its approach to the Lord's Table while still protecting the flock from eating and drinking destruction to themselves.

If the Lord's Supper belongs to the covenant community, and some must be excluded for their own good, then what is the duty of elders in regards to the Lord's Table?

The Duty of Elders

The command to elders is clear and stark: "...shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight..." (1 Peter 5:2). It is the duty of elders to tenderly and lovingly oversee the flock that God has entrusted to their care. They serve as God's undershepherds caring for His people. This is an important and weighty duty. God commands Ezekiel about performing his duties towards the people of God, "...if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, so that the people are not warned, and the sword comes and takes any one of them, that person is taken away in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at the watchman's hand," (Ezekiel 33:6).

In Matthew 16:19 Jesus speaks to Peter, as representative of the apostles: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven,

and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." The Westminster Confession of Faith makes clear that this authority now resides with the officers of the church. It is profitable and relevant to quote the entire 30th chapter which says:

- “1. The Lord Jesus, as King and Head of his church, hath therein appointed a government, in the hand of church officers, distinct from the civil magistrate.
2. To these officers the keys of the kingdom of heaven are committed; by virtue whereof, they have power, respectively, to retain, and remit sins; to shut that kingdom against the impenitent, both by the Word, and censures; and to open it unto penitent sinners, by the ministry of the gospel; and by absolution from censures, as occasion shall require.
3. Church censures are necessary, for the reclaiming and gaining of offending brethren, for deterring of others from the like offenses, for purging out of that leaven which might infect the whole lump, for vindicating the honor of Christ, and the holy profession of the gospel, and for preventing the wrath of God, which might justly fall upon the church, if they should suffer his covenant, and the seals thereof, to be profaned by notorious and obstinate offenders.
4. For the better attaining of these ends, the officers of the church are to proceed by admonition; suspension from the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper for a season; and by excommunication from the church; according to the nature of the crime, and demerit of the person.”

From this we learn three things: the authoritative nature of church leadership, the tools with which officers have been equipped, and the ends they are called to serve.

First, we see that the authority of officers is from Christ Himself. It is Jesus, the only King and Head of His Church who has appointed a government for His church and has appointed

officers to serve over it, under Him. Put simply, as we saw earlier, there is no such thing as an independent Christian. If you are part of His body then you are under the oversight of His officers. This relationship is not casual, but formal and backed by the spiritual power which Christ has delegated to His church. The incredible breadth and weight of this power is seen in 30.2 above. This authority is specifically tied to the administration of the signs of the covenant, elders 'must have authority over the sacraments to admit to or exclude from the sacraments, but only in accordance with Christ's Word.'¹³

Second, we see the tools that Christ's church has been equipped with. The power of the church is, in the language of our Book of Church Order, "only ministerial and declarative, and relates to the doctrines and precepts of Christ, to the order of the Church, and to the exercise of discipline," (BCO 11-2). The Westminster Standards make the same point by withholding certain power from the civil magistrate and reserving it only for the church saying "Civil magistrates may not assume to themselves the administration of the Word and sacraments; or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven; or, in the least, interfere in matters of faith." Put simply, the only tools that the church has been equipped with are Word and Sacraments. But by this power the church is able to "to retain, and remit sins; to shut that kingdom against the impenitent, both by the Word, and censures; and to open it unto penitent sinners." This is the greatest power which exists on earth.

Third, we see the end goal for which this power is exercised. "Church censures are necessary, for the reclaiming and gaining of offending brethren, for deterring of others from the like offenses, for purging out of that leaven which might infect the whole lump, for vindicating the honor of Christ, and the holy profession of the gospel, and for preventing the wrath of God, which might justly fall upon the church, if they should suffer his covenant, and the seals thereof,

¹³ PCA Ad Interim Committee, "Report on Fencing the Lord's Table," 295.

to be profaned by notorious and obstinate offenders," (WCF 30.3). In other words, the purpose of church censures is the glory of God and the health of His flock.

The command to fence the Table rests upon the same foundations. It is exercising the authority of Christ for the glory of God and the health of His flock. Indeed the power to exclude of necessity entails the power to include. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 5 "But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler--not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you." Is a church obligated to allow into communicant membership a notorious sinner and only exclude him after a disciplinary process? No! By no means! If someone presents themselves for membership while living in unrepentant sin they will be excluded, prevented from entering fellowship. In other words, it is the duty of the local session to determine who participates in the covenant community. Why would this power have such a broad carveout as to give sessions no authority to bar from communion those who refuse to even submit to their authority? Church discipline would crumble as a concept if sessions had no discernment over who they admit.

Indeed WLC 173 says clearly "May any who profess the faith, and desire to come to the Lord's supper, be kept from it? A. Such as are found to be ignorant or scandalous, notwithstanding their profession of the faith, and desire to come to the Lord's supper, may and ought to be kept from that sacrament, by the power which Christ hath left in his church, until they receive instruction, and manifest their reformation." It is not just that they may be kept from the Lord's Supper, but that they ought to be kept from it. It places a positive duty on the session

to bar from the Lord's Table even those who have professed faith and been baptized, when they refuse to follow Christ as Lord.

Some may object: "This kind of overzealous strictness will be off-putting to visitors and harms our witness to the world. When we fence the Table in ways that go beyond explicit scriptural warrant, we risk hurting His church. The Westminster Larger Catechism 173 speaks of the 'ignorant or scandalous' not sincere believers." That is an important concern, but we cannot let the world's reaction be the standard by which we judge what is necessary. Where the theology is clear, the pragmatic concerns must be subordinated. "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing..." (1 Corinthians 1:18). We cannot and should not add man made rules or traditions which will drive away the very sheep Christ came to save, but if fencing the Table is a biblical necessity, as I have sought to prove, then we have moved past the discussion of pragmatism. In the old covenant, participation in the sacrament required a cutting off of your foreskin, surely in comparison with that standard we can see an interview with a session as a wonderfully gracious thing rather than an undue burden.

Regarding WLC 173 it asks whether "any who profess the faith, and desire to come to the Lord's supper" may be kept from it. The answer is yes. Those found "ignorant or scandalous" may and ought to be kept from the sacrament "until they receive instruction, and manifest their reformation." A person who professes faith but refuses to submit to any session's oversight is, by definition, ignorant of the biblical nature of church membership. They are not necessarily ignorant of the gospel, but ignorant of Christ's commands regarding His church. As we established earlier, this refusal itself calls into question the credibility of their profession. The catechism's remedy is instruction and reformation, which is exactly what we offer when we invite such persons to meet with the elders and pursue membership.

As ambassadors for Christ, we can only present His Will for this world to the best of our abilities, hiding nothing, obscuring nothing, and seeking to glorify Christ as all in all. Moreover, if this duty is indeed rooted in the commands of Christ, then obedience will bring blessing. Every Lord's Supper becomes an opportunity to speak to a world profoundly lacking in understanding of community and oversight, testifying to the importance of covenant membership. It is an opportunity to testify to the love that Christ has for His flock that He will not leave them without a shepherd. Children rightly long for the Lord's Supper for years before they are ready to profess faith. In the same way, a season without the Supper should stir any believer to long for restored fellowship.

There is one additional element: I have attempted to explore the biblical and confessional underpinnings of the BCO but the fact remains, that for officers in the PCA we are bound to follow the BCO. The Book of Church Order clearly states "Since, by our Lord's appointment, this Sacrament sets forth the Communion of Saints, the minister, at the discretion of the Session, before the observance begins, may either invite all those who profess the true religion, and are communicants in good standing in any evangelical church, to participate in the ordinance; or may invite those who have been approved by the Session, after having given indication of their desire to participate," (58-4). We have much freedom as elders to exercise our own wisdom in areas where the scripture, or the constitution do not speak, but where the scriptures or the constitution does speak we are joyfully bound by our vows and our duties to Christ to obey them.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to demonstrate that fencing the communion table by requiring church membership is the necessary outworking of three biblical truths: credible profession

requires submission to Christ's appointed shepherds, the Lord's Supper is a covenant meal for the visible covenant community, and Christ has given His elders the keys of the kingdom to guard His flock from profaning His table.

In the first section, we established that a credible profession necessarily includes submission to Christ as Lord, which manifests in obedience to His command to submit to church leaders. In the second section, we demonstrated that the Lord's Supper is a covenant meal for the visible covenant community, with boundaries rooted in the covenant pattern from Exodus through Acts. To partake is to profess unity not just with Christ but with His church. You cannot be united to the Head while cutting yourself off from the Body. In the third section, we examined the duty and authority Christ has given to elders through the keys of the kingdom, binding PCA sessions to fence the Table according to our confessional standards and Book of Church Order.

This is not harsh legalism but pastoral love. When we fence the table, we protect souls from divine judgment (1 Corinthians 11:29-30), preserve the purity of Christ's church (WCF 29.8), maintain the ability to exercise discipline, and visibly mark the boundaries of covenant membership. We are being faithful shepherds.

In Hebrews 13:17, we see the church's leaders, the command to submit, the duty of the elder towards the flock, and the relationship that should exist between sheep and shepherd. The author writes "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you." John Owen describes this relationship as one of beauty and usefulness.¹⁴ If we as shepherds desire good sheep, we must labor to teach and explain to them their duties so that they may know how to obey. We must carry out the command of 2 Timothy 4:2: "preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and

¹⁴ John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, vol. 7 (West Linn, OR: Monergism Books, 2019), 582.

exhort, with complete patience and teaching." Sometimes this will mean preaching the gospel to an unbeliever, at other times, it will mean explaining to a rugged individualist that despite what every other church has taught them, they need to be members of a church to partake of all the privileges of a Christian.

This teaching responsibility includes how we fence the table. We should be clear and kind, pointing those not yet members to the path: "If you desire to partake but are not yet a member, speak with an elder. This Table will be here when you join us." We are not building walls but marking the path to worthy participation.

When we stand before Christ, we will give account not for whether we made everyone comfortable, but whether we were faithful stewards who guarded His flock. The path to the Lord's Table runs through Christ's church, under His shepherds, in fellowship with His people. This is not exclusion but invitation to the fullness of covenant blessing. This is not a burden but grace. This is pastoral faithfulness for the glory of God and the good of His flock. May God grant us wisdom and courage to guard His Table with conviction and compassion, that His church may flourish and His name be honored.

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