

Fencing the Lord's Table

By Jonathan Edwards

Extracted from: *An Humble Enquiry into the Rules of the Word of God, Concerning the Qualifications Requisite to a Complete Standing and Full Communion in the Visible Church*

As for the church of Scotland, I find they have adopted the Westminster Confession, Catechisms, and Directory, which debar all ignorant and ungodly persons from the Lord's table, and require everyone to examine himself, not only as to his knowledge, but also his faith, repentance, love, new obedience, etc. — In their books of discipline, I observe sundry passages that appropriate the sacrament to the truly penitent and faithful, as the only proper subjects.

Their national covenant, renewed from time to time, has this clause, to the which [true reformed kirk] we join ourselves willingly, in doctrine, faith, religion, discipline and use of the holy sacraments, as lively members of the same in Christ our Head, etc.

And among the divines of Scotland, I find many in their sermons, sacramental speeches, and other discourses, declaring themselves strongly on the negative part in the question before us, advising to strictness in admission to the Lord's supper, renouncing the opinion of its being a converting ordinance, inviting only the sincere friends of Christ to it, and frequently warning professors conscious of reigning sin and hypocrisy to forbear approaching the Lord's table.

I might bring much to this purpose from Mr. Andrew Gray's book of sermons, published anno 1716; and his sermons printed anno 1746; with a preface by Mr. Willison. — So from Mr. Ebenezer Erskine's synodical sermon, anno 1732. — And from Mr. Ralph Erskine's sermon on "Isaiah 13:6. and his discourse on fencing the tables, annexed to his sermon on John 16:15. — So from Mr. Willison's synodical sermon, anno 1733; where he sets down a variety of searching questions (no less than twenty-seven) which he advises to be put to proponents, and their answers to be waited for, before they are admitted. — The anonymous author of a Defence of National Churches against the Independents, (who is, reputed to be Mr. Willison,) asserts it as a Presbyterian principle, that none have right before God to the complete communion of the church, but such as have grace; and that none are to be admitted but they who are saints, at least in profession, such as profess to accept of the offers of Christ's grace, etc. and confess themselves to be sincere.

Mr. Avtone, in his Review against Mr. Glas, owns that the Lord's supper is not a formal mean of conversion, but of further growth and nourishment to those already converted. In the same strain is Mr. Nasmith's Treatise of the Entail of the Covenant. — And Mr. Warden's Essay on Baptism. In a word, I find Mr. Currie (in his synodical sermon, anno 1732) testifying of the ministers in Scotland, that they are tender (i. e. circumspect and cautious) in admitting people to the holy table of the Lord, knowing the design of the ordinance is not conversion, but confirmation, and he observes, that all who approve themselves to God here, will a thousand times rather choose to have, was it but one table or halt a table of honest communicants, true believers and real saints than have a hundred tables, by admitting any that are unworthy (or Christless souls as he anon characterizes them,) of whom there are not moral evidences of their fitness for this holy ordinance.

And for the commendable practice of the church of Scotland, in being pointed and particular in debarring the unworthy from this ordinance, (says he,) God forbid ever it turn into desuetude. I think I may here not unfitly subjoin those remarkable passages in Mr. Anderson's excellent Defence of the Presbyterians, against Mr. Rhind; where he informs us, they look upon this holy ordinance as the common privilege of the faithful, and therefore they usually fence the Lord's table, in the words of Scripture, as 1 Corinthians 6:9. or some suchlike.

To exclude the impenitent from the privilege of gospel-mysteries, to debar those from the Lord's table, whom the Lord has, by the express sentence of his word, debarred out of the kingdom at heaven, is what everyone, who is not quite lost in impiety, must own to be not only lawful, but a duty. Upon which I beg leave to observe, according to this principle I do not see but that a man who with apparent signs of credibility confesses himself habitually impenitent ought to be debarred from the Lord's table: and surely by parity of reason, he that knows himself to be unregenerate, ought to refrain coming, since there can be no true repentance without regeneration. I think we have no just grounds to suppose Mr. Stoddard's principle in this matter has hitherto any general prevalence in the church of Scotland.