

**“It’s for a Sinner”:  
Overcoming Fear at the Lord’s Table**

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One Sabbath day, late in his ministry, while serving as a pastor and professor in the Free Church of Scotland, John Duncan was preparing to celebrate the Lord's Supper. In Duncan's experience, joy and sorrow were often mingled in his participation in the meal – sorrow for his sins, yet joy in the assurance of his forgiveness. As he prepared himself, he heard behind him a woman sobbing. This woman was a communicant member, having been interviewed by the elders. She had every outward indication of a life of repentance and faith. Yet as the elements were passed to her, she wept, and her hands trembled, too timid to take the elements, too timid to appropriate to herself the gospel promises signified in the sacrament.<sup>1</sup> Surely this woman's experience at the Lord's Supper is not unique. The volumes of practical theology dealing with apprehension at the Lord's Supper demonstrate the prevalence of this phenomenon. But if the Lord's Supper is truly a means of grace, instituted for the good of the communicants, why do some genuine believers hesitate and fear to partake in this sacrament? Are there distinct, biblical qualifications for coming to the Table with confidence? As this problem is so common, what methods have faithful ministers prescribed to those under their care for peace of conscience while coming to the Lord's Table? Genuine believers can struggle at the Lord's Table; therefore, their ministers should to seek to understand their fears, to explain the true biblical grounds for coming to the Table, and to employ faithful methods for responding to their fears and for encouraging them as they work towards finding comfort at the Lord's Table.

Genuine believers, who are living in faith and obedience, may still struggle with fear and anxiety when they come to the Lord's Table, or may abstain from partaking out of fear and anxiety. The explanations for such fear and anxiety are manifold, but common reasons are fear at the words of warning in 1 Corinthians 11; a lack of assurance, and seeing assurance as of the

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<sup>1</sup> A. Moody Stuart, *The Life of John Duncan* (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1991), 100.

essence of faith, rather than a benefit of our effectual calling; an overly legal conscience, thinking that their small and imperfect sanctification must disqualify them from the meal; and misunderstanding the meaning of the Supper as being a reward for the obedient, rather than being a sanctifying grace to aid in new obedience and faith.

The warnings against unworthily partaking of the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11 are sobering:

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 judgement on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died (1 Cor. 11:27-30, ESV).

Paul presents unworthily partaking in the Lord's Supper as disrespectful towards Christ and dangerous to the communicant. Jonathan Edwards pictured those who come in an unworthy manner as beasts eating their prey and drinking Christ's blood out of a "murderous-bloodthirstiness."<sup>2</sup> Edwards is as vivid as he is correct in his exposition. It is because of the solemnity of the Supper and the seriousness of the warnings attached to it that many genuine believers experience fear and anxiety. Yet when the words of warning hinder believers from coming to the Table these believers miss the main thrust of Paul's imperative – that they would come.

A lack of assurance may also contribute to a fearful experience at the Lord's Table. As the consequences of coming unworthily are so severe, it should be little wonder that those who lack assurance of salvation find the sacrament not an occasion for joy and comfort, but an occasion for anxiety, doubt, and fear. Believers in this state often confuse the nature of assurance, seeing it as an essential aspect of faith, and therefore as an essential aspect of their

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<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Mark Valeri (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 17:271.

worthy partaking of the Supper. They mistake, however, a benefit of salvation with salvation itself. The Westminster Confession of Faith and the Canons of Dort confirm the confusion of people in this state: “Assurance doth *not* so belong to the essence of faith”<sup>3</sup> and “The Scripture moreover testifies that *believers*....do not always feel this assurance of faith and certainty of persevering.”<sup>4</sup>

Those who struggle with assurance at the Lord’s Supper often do so because of an overly legal conscience in their self-examination. This propensity can rob the believer of joy and confidence at the meal. Many in this condition would surely agree with Thomas Watson’s analysis after self-examination: “How many sins have we to subdue! How many duties to perform! How many wants to supply! How many graces to strengthen!”<sup>5</sup> Charles Simeon verifies this outlook in his outline of 1 Corinthians 11: “Many are kept from the Table by a sense of their own unworthiness.”<sup>6</sup> Yet often these same individuals, who are so precise and exacting in their self-examination, are blind to the gracious work of God in their hearts. Joel Beeke relates the story of an elder in his congregation, who early one week when the Lord’s Supper was to be celebrated spoke of sweet communion with God. Yet as he prepared for communion later that same week, he dismissed his experience, and doubted if he should come to the Supper. Beeke went on to describe how believers can entertain a spirit of diffidence in their self-examination: “Somehow they think — deep down — that they’re being more holy when they push [an experience of God’s kindness and assurance] away than when they embrace it and acknowledge

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<sup>3</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith 18.3, emphasis added.

<sup>4</sup> Canons of Dort 5.11, emphasis added.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Watson, *The Lord’s Supper* (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2004), 44.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Simeon, *Expository Outlines on the Whole Bible*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 16:294-295.

what he has done.”<sup>7</sup> It appears, then, that many lack confidence to come to the Table, not because God is unwilling to give assurance of his love, and not because there is no evidence of his work in their lives, but because they have unintentionally despised in their own hearts “the day of small things” (Zech. 4:10).

A final reason believers may struggle at the Supper is by misunderstanding the sacrament as being a kind of reward for those who have attained a high enough level of sanctification and holiness. A believer in this condition hears the warnings and the threatenings of Scripture. A believer in this condition examines his life according to the perfect standard of God’s Word. A believer in this condition knows that some are invited to the Supper. Yet such believers reason that those who are invited are those who have measured themselves according to the standard of God’s word and been found acceptable in their progress in holiness. They cannot see the meal as having sanctifying grace for those who come, but instead see it as a prize for those who have obtained sanctification through their own works and merits.

With such an array of doubts and hindrances in the way of some believers participating in the Lord’s Supper with confidence, it is necessary to examine the Word of God as to the biblical qualifications for coming worthily to his Table. Considered broadly, the qualifications for coming are preparation (involving self-examination and repentance) and discernment (involving knowledge and faith in the thing signified).

Preparation is essential to a right receiving of the Lord’s Supper. Paul commands the Corinthians to see to their physical needs of sustenance before coming to the meal – “if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home” (1 Cor. 11:34). Believers must be physically prepared to receive the most spiritual benefit from the meal. Yet if physical preparations are necessary, more so are

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<sup>7</sup> Joel Beeke, “Lack of Assurance,” lecture, Ligonier Ministries, Orlando, FL, 2019, accessed 16 February 2021, <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/series/assurance-of-faith/lack-of-assurance/>.

spiritual preparations. Matthew Westerholm notes that historically, faithful believers took the duty of preparation very seriously: “The Puritans noted that participants should prepare for the Lord’s Supper with quantitatively large as well as qualitatively rich periods of time in meditation.”<sup>8</sup> Paul commands that believers examine themselves before coming to the meal: “Let a person examine himself” (1 Cor. 11:28). Edwards taught that communicants should examine themselves as to their relationship to sin, their hatred of sin, their love for the brethren, and their reasons for desiring to participate.<sup>9</sup> While the results of this self-examination are often discouraging, the duty cannot be overlooked by one coming to the Table. The answer to fear and doubt is not to ignore the command to examine oneself.

The ability to discern the Lord’s body is also a requirement to a proper coming to the Lord’s Table (1 Cor. 11:29). That is to say that those who would come, properly discerning the Lord’s body, are those who recognize the significance of the meal, those who recognize what it was for Christ to have his body broken and his blood shed. There is an element of knowledge required in the meal. Faith in the thing signified is also necessary, namely that Christ’s blood has been poured out for many for the remission of sins, and that the communicant has a knowledge of this blood.<sup>10</sup> Just as self-examination cannot be avoided, the knowledge and faith to discern the Lord’s body must be present in a believer coming to the Table.

While God makes clear in his word the requirements for coming to his Table, it is undeniable that those requirements necessitate on the part of the Christian a subjective

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<sup>8</sup> Matthew Westerholm, “The ‘Cream of Creation’ and the ‘Cream of Faith’: The Lord’s Supper as a Means of Assurance in Puritan Thought,” *Puritan Reformed Journal* 3, no. 1 (January 2011): 210.

<sup>9</sup> Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 17:267-269.

<sup>10</sup> Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 752. In this section Beeke and Jones summarize the teaching of William Perkins on the Lord’s Supper in *The Works of William Perkins*, ed. Joel R. Beeke and Greg A. Salazar (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 6:168-169.

assessment of his condition before coming. And as discussed under the fears and anxieties in coming to the Table, it is not necessarily an unwillingness to examine that leads some to abstain, but an unhappiness with what they find in their examination. It is not a lack of understanding the person and work of Christ *per se*, but an inability to be confident that they have an interest in the saving work of Christ's broken body and shed blood.

It is in response to this conflict between duty and experience that believers need pastoral help and counsel. After describing the duties necessary to properly prepare for the Lord's Supper, William Perkins offered this piece of counsel: "If you feel in yourself some great defect and want of faith, pray to God earnestly that He will vouchsafe to increase it." Perkins continued, "If you cannot do this yourself, *use the aid of the faithful*, which may by their faith carry you as men did the sick of the palsy upon their shoulders and laid him before Christ (Mark 2:3)."<sup>11</sup> Pastors need to come alongside the fearful and anxious, and encourage them to commune with Christ at his Table.

For those believers who balk at the words of warning in Scripture, they certainly need to rebalance their hearing of the word of God. True, there is a warning, and it excludes some. But pastors must ensure that those who fear the warning also hear the invitation. Those who fear need to hear Christ say to them, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you" (Luke 22:15). They need to hear it said of Christ, "This man receives sinners, and eats with them" (Luke 15:2). They need to hear the meal offered to the thirsty, hungry, and poor: "Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.... Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good and delight yourself in rich food" (Isaiah 55:1, 2b). For those who hear only the

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<sup>11</sup> Perkins, *The Works of William Perkins*, 6:169, emphasis added.

threatenings, let pastors encourage them through God's word to take God's invitation at his word. The testimony of Scripture is that there is room for them at the Table (Luke 14:22), and the God-breathed invitation is their communion token.

Those who lack assurance should also be encouraged to come to this meal. This has been the consistent witness of the Reformed pastoral tradition. It was the position of the Westminster divines, who deal with this issue in the Larger Catechism question and answer 172,

*Question:* May one who doubteth of his being in Christ...come to the Lord's Supper?

*Answer:* One who doubteth of his being in Christ...may have true interest in Christ, though he be not yet assured thereof; and in God's account hath it, if he be duly affected with the apprehension of the want of it, and unfeignedly desires to be found in Christ, and to depart from iniquity: in which case (because promises are made, and this Sacrament is appointed, for the relief even of weak and doubting Christians) he is to bewail his unbelief, and labor to have his doubts resolved; and, so doing, he may and ought to come to the Lord's Supper, that he may be further strengthened.

This answer deals with a pastorally challenging issue, namely that those who lack assurance often recuse themselves from a means of grace whereby God is pleased to grant assurance!

Westerholm argued that in Puritan thought "one of the chief ends of participating in the Lord's Supper was assurance."<sup>12</sup> Thomas Doolittle encouraged doubting believers to come to the Table in order to find assurance: "I am persuaded that if you would go unto this ordinance, you would in time hear God speaking peace and comfort to your soul."<sup>13</sup> Certainly, believers who lack assurance of God's love ought to be encouraged to come to this ordinance where they are called to remember Christ's sacrifice, and to enjoy the benefits of his sacrifice, even assurance of his love.

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<sup>12</sup> Westerholm, "The Lord's Supper as a Means of Assurance in Puritan Thought," 205.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Doolittle, *A Treatise Concerning the Lord's Supper*, ed. Don Kistler (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1997), 156.



Those who genuinely desire to commune, yet because of an overly scrupulous conscience feel unworthy, ought to be encouraged to commune. Believers in this state ought to be instructed to better understand what the Scriptures require regarding self-examination. Gordon Keddie explains, “Self-examination is not the same as morbid introspection,” and he continues, “Neither is self-examination to be reduced to a relentlessly negative exercise in internal faultfinding [*sic*].”<sup>14</sup> Surely communicant members ought to understand that moral perfection in this life is unattainable, and that the most holy believers have indwelling sin. If this is the case, then finding sin upon self-examination cannot be disqualifying.

Regarding self-examination, many faithful pastors seem to have distinguished between being sinful and walking in sin. The former will be the condition of everyone who comes to the Table for all time, while the latter is a legitimately disqualifying relationship with sin. Keddie writes, “The Supper is for believers, for believing sinners, but not for unrepenting believing sinners *in the grip* of sinful attitudes towards the Lord.”<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Edwards described the conduct of those who eat and drink unworthily: “They go on *in* known wickedness... They go on *in* the indulgences of their filthy lusts.”<sup>16</sup> Thomas Watson imagined a conversation between God and an unexamined sinner coming to the Table where God said to the sinner, “What has thou to do here *in* thy sins?”<sup>17</sup> Those excluded from the Supper, then, are those who embrace their sins, who cherish their sins, who nurse their sins, and who would be sorry to be rid of their sins. But those who acknowledge their sinfulness, and who desire to be washed and made clean ought to

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<sup>14</sup> Gordon J. Keddie, *The Lord’s Supper Is a Celebration of Grace: What the Bible Teaches About the Lord’s Supper* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 2000), 65.

<sup>15</sup> Keddie, *The Lord’s Supper*, 67, emphasis added.

<sup>16</sup> Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 17:271, emphasis added.

<sup>17</sup> Watson, *The Lord’s Supper*, 41, emphasis added.

be encouraged to come to the Table. “The focus of this self-examination is participation,” Keddie says. “It is not designed to keep Christians away, but to impel them to fly to Jesus in the repentant, confiding spirit of a lively faith.”<sup>18</sup> It is those who recognize that they are unworthy in themselves who need the exhortation to participate in the Supper and in it to find grace that supplies all their wants.

Finally, those who misunderstand the meal, not as a help to sanctification, but as a reward for it, ought to be lovingly corrected. They cannot be allowed to reason that they are not sanctified enough to partake, when it is through the meal that God communicates grace, including sanctifying grace. Just as those who lack assurance ought to be encouraged to come and find assurance, so those who lack sanctification ought to come and find sanctifying grace. Doolittle responded to those who imagined that sin prohibits them from partaking, saying, “It is hypocrisy to complain of the hardness of your heart and yet not use the means to have it softened, to complain of the power of sin and not use the means to have it weakened.”<sup>19</sup> Of course this does not negate the need for legitimate, thorough self-examination, but only reinforces the point made by Keddie above, that the unwelcome presence of indwelling sin ought to drive believers to the meal.

Genuine believers can struggle at the Lord’s Table. Therefore, their ministers should seek to understand their fears, to explain the true biblical grounds for coming to the Table, and to employ faithful methods for responding to their fears and for encouraging them as they work towards finding comfort at the Lord’s Table. The struggles of many believers revolve, in part, around fearing the warnings of Scripture, lacking assurance of God’s love, and misunderstanding

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<sup>18</sup> Keddie, *The Lord’s Supper*, 66.

<sup>19</sup> Doolittle, *A Treatise Concerning the Lord’s Supper*, 155.

the relationship between sanctification and the sacrament. In response to these apprehensions, pastors need to point those who fear to the invitation of Christ, encourage those who lack assurance to participate, and encourage those unhappy with their small steps in sanctification to have that sanctification aided by the grace offered at the Lord's Table. As with all spiritual matters, there are dangers on either side of the issue. Some believers tend towards antinomianism rather than legalism, and are not as serious as God desires in their self-examination and pursuit of holiness. A different pastoral approach would be required for such believers. But those who are fearful at the Lord's Table need pastors to follow the gentle disposition of their Lord, who will never break bruised reeds, or snuff out faintly burning wicks (Isa. 42:3). Timorous believers, like the woman in John Duncan's church so many years ago, need the compassionate exhortation of their pastors to partake in the gracious meal that Christ has spread for his people. As the woman's hand trembled over the cup, Duncan earnestly encouraged her to participate, whispering to her, "It's for a sinner."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Stuart, *The Life of John Duncan*, 100.

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