ChatGPT

Communion Practices in Conservative Congregational and Presbyterian Traditions

Historical Teachings on Communion Admission (17th–18th Centuries)

Congregationalist (Puritan) Standards: The New England Puritans, as expressed in the *Cambridge Platform* (1648), believed the visible church should consist **only of regenerate persons as full members** [1]. Consequently, **participation in the Lord's Supper was restricted to those admitted as "communicants"** after a credible profession of faith. Even children baptized in the church were not allowed to commune until examined and able to **"manifest their faith and repentance by an open profession"** of conversion [2]. The Cambridge Platform insisted that *"holy things must not be given unto the unworthy,"* requiring a thorough trial of faith before anyone—whether raised in the church or coming from outside—was admitted to the Table [2]. Non-members could not casually partake; if a believer from another town wished to commune, a **letter of recommendation** from their home church was *"requisite, and sufficient for communion"* in the new congregation [3]. In short, early Congregationalists practiced a **strict (closed) communion**: the Lord's Supper was a privilege of church covenant membership or its equivalent.

Savoy Declaration (1658): English Congregationalists echoed the same principles. The Savoy Confession (largely adopting the Westminster Confession) retained the warning that *"all ignorant and ungodly persons… are unworthy of the Lord's table, and cannot, without great sin, partake of these holy mysteries, or be admitted thereunto"* [4]. The accompanying Savoy *Platform of Church-Discipline* likewise upheld a regenerate church membership ideal. Thus, conservative Congregational churches, whether in New England or England, theologically fenced the table to **professing saints only**, barring the unbelieving or scandalous from communion.

Presbyterian Westminster Standards: The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) and related documents set the tone for Presbyterian practice. Westminster taught that while the Lord's Supper is a means of grace to worthy partakers, *"all ignorant and ungodly persons, as they are unfit to enjoy communion with [Christ], so are they unworthy of the Lord's table, and cannot…partake of these holy mysteries, or be admitted thereunto."* [4] The Confession thus assumes an **active church oversight**: unworthy individuals must be kept from the sacrament. The Westminster *Directory for Public Worship* accordingly instructs ministers to **"warn all such as are ignorant, scandalous, profane, or that live in any sin…that they presume not to come to that holy table"**, while inviting humbled, repentant believers to partake [5]. In practice, 17th-century Presbyterian elders took this duty seriously. It was the **Session's responsibility to admit or bar individuals from communion**, examining members' knowledge and life. Notably, Scottish Presbyterians developed the use of **communion tokens** as tangible admission tickets: after catechetical instruction and personal examination, approved members received a token granting them entry to the Lord's Table [6] [7]. This system exemplified a form of **closed communion** – only those under the church's discipline and deemed credible in faith could participate.

"Open" vs. "Closed" in Early Practice: It is important to note that **Presbyterians were slightly more permissive than Congregationalists** about who was regarded as a church member. In the 1640s, English Presbyterians did *"not insist upon a regenerate church membership"* the way Congregationalists did, and they **"allowed all 'non-scandalous' churchgoers to receive the Lord's Supper."** [8] In a parish setting, this meant any baptized person not under discipline was welcome to the table. By contrast, Congregationalists required an explicit conversion testimony and covenant for full membership, thereby narrowing the communion circle to "visible saints." **Theologically**, however, both groups agreed that known unbelievers or persons of openly impious life must be excluded – the difference was mainly how one attained the status of a worthy communicant (broader baptismal inclusion for Presbyterians versus a stricter regenerate membership for Congregationalists). Both traditions stressed **fencing the table** against the unworthy; thus neither endorsed completely "open" communion in the modern sense of *anyone present may partake*. Communion was a covenant meal for those in the Lord's church, with **elders acting as gatekeepers** of the ordinance.

Practical Communion Fencing in Reformed Churches

In **Conservative Congregational practice**, the outworking of these principles was that only admitted church members partook of communion. The Cambridge Platform explicitly noted that baptized youth had *"privileges which others not church members have not,"* but **they still could not come to the Lord's Supper without undergoing examination and joining as communicants** [9]. Strangers or visitors could commune only if they presented suitable credentials (a commendatory letter, as noted) to the local church [3]. This amounts to what later generations might call **"close communion"** – not necessarily locked to one local congregation, but restricted to those who are accountable members of some sound church. In the New England Puritan era, the **Half-Way Covenant** controversy (1660s) highlights this strictness: many baptized adults were kept from the Lord's Table because they could not profess a conversion; the "half-way" compromise allowed their children to be baptized, but *still* denied these unconverted adults the Supper. Such debates show how seriously communion eligibility was taken in Congregational churches.

In **Presbyterian practice**, especially in Scotland and colonial America, communion seasons were conducted with searching care. Prospective communicants often attended preparatory classes or services examining their understanding of the gospel. Kirk sessions (boards of elders) would oversee **self-examination and repentance** in the congregation prior to communion, sometimes even conducting pastoral visits to admonish or reconcile members before admitting them to the table [10] [11]. The use of **communion tokens** became widespread in Scottish Presbyterianism (and among their American and Irish offshoots) by the 18th century. As one historian notes, *"the issuing of these tokens is dependent on the practice of closed communion, in which only members of the church are allowed to participate."* Elders acting as *"moral watchdogs"* would give tokens *"to those members of the faithful whom they deemed qualified by virtue of correct belief and proper conduct."* [6] On communion Sunday, only those who could present their token (or card) were admitted to the Lord's Table. This system ensured that **known believers in good standing** partook, and outsiders or the unexamined did not. It persisted in many conservative Presbyterian churches into the 19th century, until eventually tokens were phased out as practices liberalized [7].

Despite these mechanisms, it's worth reiterating that **Presbyterian fences were broad enough to include more than just the local membership**. From the 19th century onward, rules began to ease such that *"visitors who were members of other denominations, on profession of their faith,"* could be allowed to communicate [7]. This reflects a shift from strictly *"closed"* communion toward a more **"open" communion among true believers**: a recognition that one needn't be on the local roll to be received, so long as one was

a baptized believer under some church's care. Still, the *Session* (elders) retained authority to judge the credibility of visitors' professions. The **integrity of the Table as a holy ordinance** remained paramount.

Modern Positions in Conservative Churches and Church Orders

Presbyterian Church in America (PCA): A flagship conservative Presbyterian body in the U.S., the PCA explicitly allows what might be called *guarded open communion*. The PCA's *Book of Church Order* (BCO) directs that, at each communion, *"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"* prior to partaking [12]. In other words, **being a communicant member of some branch of Christ's church is required**, but not necessarily of the PCA congregation itself. In practice, most PCA churches issue a general invitation to "all who are believers in Christ and communicant members of an evangelical church." For visitors who belong to no church or whose background is unclear, sessions have the right (and duty) to **withhold the elements** – either by quietly advising them not to partake, or by the more formal route of requiring those unknown to the elders to speak with a pastor/elder before coming to the Table [12]. This aligns with historic Reformed polity: the **keys of the kingdom** (church discipline) include admitting or excluding from sacraments [13] [14]. The PCA's stance can be summarized as **open communion for all true believers under church oversight**, but **closed communion against the unbelieving and unaccountable**.

Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC): The OPC holds a similar theological position. Only baptized believers who have made a public profession of faith (thus joining the visible Church) are proper communicants [15]. OPC congregations typically "fence the table" by reading the biblical warnings (1 Cor. 11) and exhorting that *those who are not trusting in Christ, or who are living in disobedience, refrain* [16]. Visitors from other churches are ordinarily welcome if they can answer in good conscience that they are faithful Christians. However, some OPC sessions have reinstituted a more deliberate fencing. For example, one OPC session, finding it inconsistent to leave admission entirely to individual choice, implemented a **"restricted communion"** practice: advance notice is given that the Supper is for *"those baptized in the Triune Name, who have publicly professed faith in Christ, and are members of an evangelical church."* Visitors desiring to partake are asked to **speak with an elder** beforehand, and on communion day the elders explicitly request any who have not done so to abstain [17] [18]. During distribution, officers will even *withhold the plates* from those who haven't been approved [19]. Such measures, though not ubiquitous, show the enduring conviction in conservative Presbyterianism that **the Sacrament must be safeguarded** and that the church's officers *"do not admit everyone indiscriminately"* [16]. The OPC's official Directory for Worship likewise specifies that only those who have professed faith and united with Christ's Church should be welcomed to the Table, applying the Westminster Confession's principle that communicants are to *"be admitted"* by the church, not **self-admitted** [15] [16].

Conservative Congregational Churches: While many historic Congregational churches drifted into liberal theology (eventually merging into the United Church of Christ), there are conservative Congregational bodies (e.g. the Conservative Congregational Christian Conference in the U.S.) that continue the Puritan ecclesiology. These churches generally maintain that the Lord's Supper is for **professing Christians who are walking faithfully**. In practice, they often invite "all who have trusted in Jesus Christ as Savior and been baptized" to partake, which functionally resembles the Presbyterian invitation to all true believers. The key difference is that Congregational polity doesn't emphasize denominational membership as much as **local covenant membership**. Even today, influenced by the Cambridge Platform's legacy, a Congregational church expects that ordinarily one should **join the local fellowship** before regularly communing. However,

as a courtesy, most will receive visitors who are known to be believers in good standing elsewhere (essentially following the old practice of receiving those with a *"letter of recommendation"* from another church) [3]. Theologically, they stand with the Reformed tradition at large: the Table is **open to the weak and humble believer** who examines himself, but **closed to the unbelieving, openly sinful, or the unrepentant**. The Savoy Declaration's warning against admitting the "ignorant and ungodly" still captures the stance of conservative Congregationalists as well as Presbyterians [4].

Conclusion: Practical and Theological Summary

Both conservative Congregational and Presbyterian traditions historically practiced a form of **"fenced" communion**. Theologically, they agree that the Lord's Supper is a covenant ordinance for the Church – it **signifies and seals the benefits of Christ to those in union with Him** – and thus it must be guarded from profanation. This led to *closed communion* practices in earlier centuries: **only those under the care of Christ's church, judged to be true believers, were admitted to the Supper**. The great Reformed confessions and directories (Cambridge Platform, Savoy, Westminster, etc.) unanimously teach that known unbelievers or scandalous persons must be kept from the table [4] [5]. Historically, Congregationalists enforced this by requiring explicit church membership based on a conversion testimony [1] [2], whereas Presbyterians relied on territorial parish membership tempered by pastoral examination and discipline (hence the token system to certify one's fitness) [6].

In more modern practice, **most conservative Reformed churches have an "open" posture toward fellow Christians**: a Presbyterian or Congregational church will happily commune a visiting believer **who is baptized and in good standing with an evangelical church**, even if not of their denomination [12]. This reflects a catholic recognition of all true branches of Christ's Church. Yet the communion is not open to absolutely anyone: it remains **"closed" to unbelievers and to those outside Christ's covenant community**. In essence, the Table is **open to all faithful Christians, but closed to those who are not** – a principle deeply rooted in both the theological standards and the historical practices of conservative Congregationalism and Presbyterianism [4] [6]. This balanced approach honors the solemn warnings of Scripture while celebrating the unity of Christ's body across congregations.

Sources:

- Cambridge Platform of Church Discipline (New England, 1648) – see esp. chapters on membership and sacraments [2] [3]
- Savoy Declaration and Platform (England, 1658) – Congregational confession echoing Westminster on the Lord's Supper [4]
- Westminster Confession of Faith XXIX & Directory for Public Worship (1640s) – Reformed teaching on fencing the Lord's table [5] [4]
- *Communion Token* history (Scottish Presbyterian practice) [6] [7]
- PCA Book of Church Order 58-4 (modern Presbyterian communion invitation guidelines) [12]
- OPC Directory and practice (example of "restricted communion" in a modern OPC congregation) [15] [18]
- Cooper, James F., *Tenacious of Their Liberties: The Congregationalists in Colonial Massachusetts*, on Puritan membership and communion (as cited in [8]).

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