Assurance is the subjective sense a believer possesses of the certainty of his or her own salvation—a personalizing of God’s promises. All believers have some degree of assurance (Rom. 8:16–17), but some believers have a stronger sense of it than others. Because of the deceptive human heart, “false assurance” is possible and must be avoided. “True assurance,” on the other hand, is to be pursued by all believers, with “full assurance” possible for some believers. The Puritans believed, following Calvin, that faith is “a firm and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence toward us, founded on the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds, and sealed upon our hearts, through the Holy Spirit.” Consisting of the same essence as faith, assurance is then the “cream of faith,” an increase in the amount and richness of faith, but not a change to its substance.

This essay traces a line of reasoning, advanced by a number of Puritan authors, that one of the chief ends of participating in the Lord’s Supper is assurance. To demonstrate this, five questions will be investigated. (1) Who is to be admitted to the Lord’s Supper? Since

2. “It is a duty in all to make after assurance” (Edward Taylor, *Edward Taylor’s Treatise Concerning the Lord’s Supper* [Boston: Twain Publisher, 1988], 156).
only believers have genuine faith and the possibility of assurance, the Lord’s Supper could not provide genuine assurance to all of its participants if unbelievers were invited to the sacrament.\(^6\) Relatedly, the degree of faith a participant must possess will be investigated.

(2) How does one participate in the Lord’s Supper? Are the practical methods of participation intended to grow the believer’s faith?

(3) Does the Lord’s Supper oppose hindrances of assurance, that is, elements that undermine the believer’s faith?

(4) How is Christ present in the Lord’s Supper, and does that type of presence grow the believer’s faith?

(5) Do participants in the Lord’s Supper actually grow in assurance, and do those who neglect this ordinance suffer?

**Who is to be Admitted to the Lord’s Supper?**

Puritan writers paid close attention to the circumstances surrounding admission to the Lord’s Supper. While a few considered it a “converting ordinance,” most Puritans followed Calvin’s teaching that “if the Spirit be lacking, the sacraments can accomplish nothing more in our minds than the splendor of the sun shining upon blind eyes, or a voice sounding in deaf ears.”\(^7\) Jonathan Edwards saw the Lord’s Supper as a sacrament reserved for believers, celebrating the unity that they have in Christ. He writes in a sermon on 1 Corinthians 10:17, “The Lord’s Supper was instituted as a solemn representation and seal of the holy and spiritual union Christ’s people have with...one another.”\(^8\) Puritans believed a high threshold applied to participation in the sacrament, apparent in the extensive discussion surrounding whether youth should properly be admitted to the table.\(^9\)

Other Puritans, notably Solomon Stoddard and William Prynne, did see the Lord’s Supper as a converting sacrament.\(^10\) This minor-

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\(^6\) Jonathan Edwards rhetorically asks, “Will any be so absurd as to say that God has appointed a holy ordinance of His worship for His honor and glory that on purpose that men might openly and on deliberation and design and most expressly and with the greatest solemnity perjure themselves after this manner?” (Sermons on the Lord’s Supper [Orlando, Fla.: The Northampton Press, 2007], 76).


\(^8\) Edwards, Sermons on the Lord’s Supper, 70, emphasis added.


\(^10\) The most famous Puritan to hold this view is Solomon Stoddard. A modern-day proponent of this theology is William L. De Arteaga (Forgotten Power: The Significance of the Lord’s Supper in Revival [Grand Rapids: Zondervan], 2002).
ity saw the sacrament as intended also for unbelievers who had basic knowledge of Christian beliefs as a means of their eventual conversion by “evoking their internal assent to the Gospel.” This was a minority view, defended against ably in Puritan times by George Gillespie and Samuel Rutherford. E. Brooks Holifield summarizes:

Neither Rutherford nor Gillespie intended to rob the sacrament of efficacy. The Lord’s Supper was still “the nourishment of those in whom Christ liveth,” increasing “the conversion which was before” by adding “a new degree of faith.” Like Calvin, they linked sacramental efficacy with the doctrine of sanctification, which described the Christian’s growth in faith and holiness. Moreover, the sacrament sealed God’s promises to the elect. Since the seal applied to the worthy communicant “in particular, the very promise that in general is made to him,” he could leave the table with assurance of God’s mercy.

In Holifield’s description, we find an abundance of “assurance” language, especially when viewing assurance as “the cream of faith”: the Lord’s Supper “increases the conversion,” adds “a new degree of faith,” and provides the communicant “with assurance of God’s mercy.” The partaker of the sacrament, however, must be one “in whom Christ liveth,” that is, a believer.

The Puritans, who distrusted state-ordained clergy, clarified that the efficacy of the sacraments did not come through ecclesiastical authority; they insisted with Calvin that the elements are signs and seals of God’s saving grace. This protected the sacrament from the

debilitating views of Roman Catholicism, which rendered assurance minimally abnormal and even practically impossible.\(^\text{17}\)

Further, the Puritan writers held that only certain believers, namely, those who come to the table in a certain assurance-seeking state, would receive the benefits of assurance; therefore, perfect faith was not required. Here, again, there is widespread agreement: assurance is desirable,\(^\text{18}\) but not necessary.\(^\text{19}\) “It’s not the faith of assurance that is necessary to this ordinance,” Edward Taylor writes, “but of affiance and trust.”\(^\text{20}\) Nor is moral perfection required, as Jonathan Edwards writes: “Your sins need to be no hindrance. Christ procured those benefits for such. He gave Himself for such.”\(^\text{21}\) Thomas Doolittle goes further, saying a person may come to the Lord’s Table “if a man cannot say he loves God, and cannot say he has faith, but yet finds he hungers and thirsts for Christ.”\(^\text{22}\) Thomas Watson summarizes this line of thinking well when he writes, “A weak faith can lay hold on a strong Christ. A palsied hand may tie the knot in marriage.”\(^\text{23}\) Matthew Henry makes this practical appeal: “If thou doubt, therefore, whether Christ be thine, put the matter out of doubt by a present consent to him: I take Christ to be mine, wholly, only, and forever mine.”\(^\text{24}\)

\(^\text{17}\) See Beeke, The Quest for Full Assurance, 12–15, 51, 63, 270.
\(^\text{18}\) “Hildersham described the worthy communicant as one who possessed a ‘true justifying faith’ and was ‘undoubtedly assured’ that Christ belongs to him, but he too urged ‘weak Christians’ to receive the sacrament” (Holifield, The Covenant Sealed, 56).
\(^\text{19}\) Thomas Doolittle, A Treatise Concerning the Lord’s Supper (Morgan, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria Pub., 1998), 137. “It [i.e., assurance] is not that which anyone is to wait for in order to his coming to the Lord’s Supper” (Edward Taylor, Edward Taylor’s Treatise, 121).
\(^\text{20}\) Ibid., 189.
\(^\text{21}\) Edwards, Sermons on the Lord’s Supper, 156.
\(^\text{22}\) Doolittle, A Treatise Concerning the Lord’s Supper, 137. Holifield notes, “The Puritans hoped that the Lord’s Supper would provide the occasion for the extension of faith and holiness among the weak and indifferent as well as the saints” (The Covenant Sealed, 57). Cf. also Edwards’s sermon “The Lord’s Supper Ought to Be Kept Up and Attended in Remembrance of Christ,” in Sermons on the Lord’s Supper, 54–69.
\(^\text{23}\) Thomas Watson, The Lord’s Supper (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2004), 73.
\(^\text{24}\) Matthew Henry, The Communicant’s Companion (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1843), 73. Henry writes “You think you are not serious enough, nor devout enough, nor regular enough, in your conversations, to come to the sacrament; and perhaps you are not: but why are you not? What hinders you? Is any more required to fit you for the sacrament, than is necessary to fit you for heaven?” (ibid., 70).
John Owen also preached that the Lord’s Supper was for believers, but called attention to the state in which believers must find themselves in order to receive the full benefit of assurance, saying that “a special end of [the Supper] was, for the confirming and strengthening of our faith. God gives out unto us the object of our faith in parcels. We are not able to take this great mysterious fruit of God’s love in gross, in the lump; and therefore he gives it out, I say, in parcels.”

**How Does One Participate in the Lord’s Supper?**

The Lord’s Supper was be taken seriously, and much preparation and care went into its observation. Jonathan Edwards writes, “’Tis the most solemn confirmation that can be conceived of.... It is more solemn than a mere oath.” Elsewhere Edwards writes, “Those who contemptuously treat those symbols of the body of Christ slain and His blood shed, why, they make themselves guilty of the body and blood of the Lord, that is, of murdering Him.” This solemnity is in keeping with the magnitude of the sacrament. Edwards, usually measured with his words, holds no superlatives back, saying, “Christ is the greatest Friend of His church, and that which is commemorated in the Lord’s Supper is the greatest manifestation of His love, the greatest act of kindness that ever was in any instance, infinitely exceeding all acts of kindness done by man one to another. It was the greatest display of divine goodness and grace that ever was.”

John Payne describes Owen’s view of the Lord’s Supper as “a sanctified dramatization of the love of God for His people,” where “those who exercise faith in Christ experience and partake of Him in the Supper.” The elements themselves Owen calls the “cream of the

28. Ibid., 107.
29. Ibid., 86. In his sermon “Christians Have Communion with Christ,” Edwards writes, “I would exhort you to...a serious and careful and joyful attendance on the Lord’s Supper” (*Sermons*, 150).
creation: which is an endless storehouse, if pursued, of representing
the mysteries of Christ.”

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. “God has taught us,” Owen says, that
“the using of an ordinance will not be of advantage to us, unless we
understand the institution, and the nature and the ends of it.” More
than mere understanding is required, since “God’s covenant prom-
ises are not ‘spiritually sealed’ by the sacraments unless received by
faith and an obedient heart.”

This meditation does not cease once the sacrament itself begins;
rather, it intensifies. Owen preached “Twenty-Five Discourses Suitable
to the Lord’s Supper” between 1669 and 1682. Here we find Owen
at his most practical, instructing the congregation under his care to
receive the most benefit from participating in the sacrament. In these
discourses, Owen urged his congregation to first meditate on “the
horrible guilt and provocation that is in sin.” Next he urged the con-
gregation “to meditate on God’s purity and holiness, that is, that holiness
that would not ‘pass by sin, when it was charged upon his Son.’”

This leads to what Owen deems to be the focal point of the Lord’s
Supper: the person and work of Jesus Christ. These are “together
received through the exercising of sincere faith.” This outworking
of faith is the attempt to see the Son with spiritual eyes. Owen says to
his congregation, “That which we are to endeavour in this ordinance
is, to get...a view of Christ as lifted up; that is bearing our iniquities
in his own body on the tree.... O that God in this ordinance would
give our souls a view of him!”

One of the results of this spiritual sight is the mortification of sin.
Owen says that “we labour by faith so to behold a dying Christ, that

32. Ibid., 9:583.
33. Payne, John Owen on the Lord’s Supper, 34. For the fullest discussion of Owen’s view of assurance, see Beeke, The Quest for Full Assurance, 165–213. Especially pertinent is the discussion of the Lord’s Supper on p. 211.
35. Ibid., emphasis in original.
strength may thence issue forth for the death of sin in our souls.”38 Conversely, another result is the vivification of faith. Here, Owen says, “God hath appointed him to be crucified evidentially before our eyes, that every poor soul that is stung with sin, ready to die by sin, should look up unto him, and be healed.”39

This is not the pursuit of some mystical experience, but the result of the cooperative work of the Spirit along with the believer’s personalization of objective truth. Owen believed that at the Lord’s Supper “Christ and His benefits are objectively offered, and received through the exercising of faith and the sovereign agency of the Holy Spirit.”40 Thomas Doolittle writes, “Let faith make particular application of this blood in all its virtues and efficacies, and say, ‘Here, O my soul, here is pardoning blood, and it is yours. Here is quickening, softening blood, and it is yours. Here is justifying, sanctifying, pleading blood, and this belongs to you.’ This will draw forth faith to do its work at the Lord’s Supper.”41

Goodwin compares the sacrament with the sermon and writes, “Of sermons, some are for comfort, some to inform, some to excite; but here in the Sacrament is all thou canst expect. Christ is here light, and wisdom, and comfort, and all to thee. He is here an eye to the blind, a foot to the lame; yea, everything to everyone.”42

And just as careful meditation and thought were used before the sacrament, the believer continues meditating and thinking afterward. As a believer, says Doolittle, I must:

consider with myself if I have received any benefit thereby.... [I will know this] by the increase of my faith in Christ and love for God; by my greater hatred of sin and power against it; by my longing after the enjoyment of God in heaven; by my prizing this ordinance above my necessary food; and by my resolutions, in the strength of Christ, to suffer for Him who died for me.43

38. Ibid., 582.
39. Ibid., 571.
40. Payne, John Owen on the Lord’s Supper, 75, emphasis added.
41. Doolittle, A Treatise Concerning the Lord’s Supper, 96.
43. Doolittle, A Treatise Concerning the Lord’s Supper, 146.
It is apparent that this is no mere mental assent to the doctrinal accuracy of the cross, but instead a heartfelt engagement. Emotional engagement is so integral to the sacrament that multiple emotions are to be expected. If these emotions conflict, then the believer should be encouraged, for sorrow (because the believer’s sins put Christ to death) will not prevent joy (at Christ’s death for those sins). As Doolittle writes, “This mixture of affection well becomes a believer at the Lord’s Table.”

This self-examination, this focused biblical meditation, this heartfelt engagement and personalization of objective truth, and this following reflection were all means of increasing a believer’s faith and giving a stronger sense of assurance.

Are the Hindrances of Assurance Opposed by the Lord’s Supper?
While the Lord’s Supper was open to all believers, not all believers were drawn to participate fully and regularly. There were several hindrances that Puritan ministers labored to address—hindrances that prevented believers from receiving all the benefits of the sacrament.

The first hindrance is the devil. Thomas Doolittle writes that the devil “will be with you at the sacrament to rob you of the comfort and hinder you from that joy that there you might be filled with.” Thomas Watson writes, “Satan would hinder from the sacrament, as Saul did the people from the honey (1 Samuel 14:26).” However, careful observance of the Lord’s Supper opposes his work. Owen says, “In our celebration of the death of Christ, we do profess against Satan, that his power is broken, that he is conquered,—tied to the chariot wheels of Christ, who has disarmed him.” Matthew Henry goes further, stating, “Christ having thus trodden Satan under our...

44. A believer asks, “‘But must I both rejoice and sorrow too? Will not either sorrow keep me from rejoicing, or rejoicing prevent my sorrowing?’ No, both these may be; both these must be. This mixture of affection well becomes a believer at the Lord’s Table. You may mourn that your sins put Christ to death, and yet you may rejoice that Christ would die for your sins” (ibid., 100).
45. Ibid., 94–95.
46. Watson, The Lord’s Supper, 60.
feet, he calls to us, as Joshua to the captains of Israel, ‘Come near, put your feet upon the necks of these kings’.”

The second hindrance is *forgetfulness*. God’s children have always battled spiritual amnesia.49 “None can be ignorant,” writes Edmund Calamy, “of how apt our hearts are to turn aside like a deceitful bow, and to lose the sense of those things which ought continually to influence and govern us.”50 Doolittle observes, “What is most to be wondered at is that we are too prone to forget God our Savior, to forget Him who delivered us from the curse of the law by being made a curse for us; who delivered us from the wrath of God by bearing it Himself; who delivered us from the sting of death by dying for us.”51 Similarly, Matthew Henry writes, “Remember him! Is there any danger of our forgetting him? If we were not wretchedly taken up with the world and the flesh, and strangely careless in the concerns of our souls, we could not forget him. But, in consideration of the treachery of our memories, this ordinance is appointed to remind us of Christ.”52 Opposing forgetfulness is one of the main designs of the Lord’s Supper, whose words of institution famously refrain, “Remember me.”

The third hindrance is simple *neglect*. The Puritans give several reasons for the neglect of the sacrament, ranging from a sense of personal unworthiness to a sense of personal pride. Either way, the Puritans warn, neglect is hypocrisy. Again Thomas Doolittle writes of the dangers while pointing to the remedy: “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 your sin and not use the means to have it weakened.”53 Against a more hardened neglector, Matthew Henry offers this warning: “Thou hast no desire to

49. “Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits” (Ps. 103:2); “Then believed they his words; they sang his praise. They soon forgot his works; they waited not for his counsel” (Ps. 106:12–13).
52. Henry, *The Communicant’s Companion*, 44. Later Henry adds, “Ought we not to remember, and can we ever forget a friend, who though he be absent from us, is negotiating our affairs, and is really absent for us?”
the wine of the love of God, but rather choosest the puddle water of sensual pleasures; but canst thou ‘drink of the wine of the wrath of God,’ which shall be poured out without mixture in the presence of the Lamb?”

By identifying these hindrances to assurance at the time of participation in the Lord’s Supper, Puritan writers believed that the very participation itself assisted the believer in overcoming these hindrances and growing in assurance.

**How is Christ Present in the Lord’s Supper?**

“One reason why we so little value the ordinance [of the Lord’s Supper],” said John Owen, “and profit so little by it, may be, because we understand so little of the nature of that special communion with Christ which we have therein.”

Reformed thought generally assumes three categories when contemplating the nature of “that special communion with Christ.” First, the Puritans rejected unilaterally the positions of Lutherans and Roman Catholics, believing that the elements of the Lord’s Supper could not ontologically be the physical blood and body of Christ. Jonathan Edwards writes, “The end of the sacrament is not that we may eat the flesh and drink the blood of Christ without a metaphor. And if we should suggest a thing so horrid and so monstrous as the papists do in their doctrine of transubstantiation, would that be any benefit to us?”

Second, Zwinglian Anabaptists emphasized the spiritual reality of the elements, often de-emphasizing and occasionally eliminating the sacraments altogether. While some Puritans had some

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56. Owen writes “This is one of the greatest mysteries of the Roman magic and juggling, that corporeal elements should have a power to forgive sins, and confer spiritual grace.... No part of Christian religion was ever so vilely contaminated and abused by profane wretches, as this pure, holy, plain action and institution of our Savior: witness the Popish horrid monster of transubstantiation, and their idolatrous mass” (ibid., 1:490–91). Holifield summarizes “In their opposition to Lutheran and Roman Catholic doctrine, the Puritans were unambiguous, and the sacramental arguments often illuminated broader intellectual presuppositions” (*The Covenant Sealed*, 59). For a primary source discussion, see Watson, *The Lord’s Supper*, 17–19.
58. “The Separatists’ repudiation of the Anglican sacraments was accompa-
Zwinglian tendencies, most Puritans belonged to a third, more Calvinistic, group.

“The key to understanding Calvin’s teaching on the presence of Christ in the Supper” writes Payne, “is to see that ‘the signs and the things signified must be distinguished without being separated.’” Later he writes, “When the bread and wine are received through the exercising of God-given faith, the body and blood of Christ are simultaneously received really and truly, albeit spiritually.” Jonathan Edwards demonstrates this view in his sermon entitled “All Divine Blessings Are as Much in and through Christ as If They Were a Feast Provided of His Flesh That Was Given for Us.” Similarly, Matthew Poole writes, “When he saith, *Take, eat,* he means no more than that true believers should by the hand of their body take the bread, and with their bodily mouths eat it, and at the same time, by the hand and mouth of faith, receive and apply all the benefits of his blessed death and passion to their souls.” Doolittle agrees, writing that the believer eats the bread and drinks the wine to signify “my union with Christ and enjoyment of Him; my feeding upon Christ by faith for the strengthening of the graces of God’s Spirit in my soul.”

Some argue that Puritans became overly scholastic in their view of the Lord’s Supper. Holifield, for example, says that Puritan pastors performed the sacramental actions “hoping that the service would thus *convey doctrinal information.*” Contrasting the Puritan approach

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59. See the discussion in Holifield, *The Covenant Sealed,* 59.

60. The commonality of service orders between Puritan liturgies is remarkable. See Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans,* 264–65, for orders of service from six different liturgies, including Calvin 1542 and Savoy 1661.


62. Ibid., 25.


64. Poole, *A Commentary,* 127. Matthew Henry explains: “We live in a world of sense, not yet in the world of spirits; and, because we therefore find it hard to look above the things that are seen, we are directed, in a sacrament, to look through them, to those things not seen, which are represented by them” (*The Communicant’s Companion,* 32).

65. Doolittle, *A Treatise Concerning the Lord’s Supper,* 146.

with Calvin’s approach, he observes that “Calvin had been wary of overemphasizing the merely didactic possibilities of sacramental worship, but in Puritan circles the Lord’s Supper was unreservedly a vivid spectacle calling to mind the saving truths of the gospel.” The result of this distortion was that “Calvinist mystery collapsed under the weight of [the Puritans’] psychological explanation.” In taking this position, Holifield underestimates the role that truth played for the Puritan heart and invents a dichotomy that Puritans would have found unbiblical. For the Puritans, doctrinal information is not the antithesis of emotional engagement and Spirit-led worship. As Edwards wrote about his own preaching, “I should think...my duty to raise the affections of my hearers as high as possibly I can, provided that they are affected with nothing but truth, and with affections that are not disagreeable to the nature of what they are affected with.”

The Father is seeking worshipers who worship in spirit and truth, and the third Person of the Trinity is in fact the Spirit of truth who guides believers into truth (John 16:13).

Do Participants Grow in Assurance?
Assurance is a main goal of almost every aspect of the Lord’s Supper. Thomas Watson writes, “Let not Christians rest in lower measures of grace, but aspire after higher degrees. The stronger our faith, the firmer is our union with Christ, and the more sweet influence we draw from him.” Similarly, Matthew Henry writes, “If thou didst duly attend on this ordinance, and improve it aright, thou wouldst find it of unspeakable use to thee for the strengthening of thy faith, the exciting of holy affections in thee, and thy furtherance in every good word and work.”

The initial self-examination, so important to Puritans, is itself a means of assurance. This must be seen as quanti-

67. Ibid., 54, emphasis added.
68. Ibid., 61.
70. Watson, The Lord’s Supper, 73.
72. “The Holy Spirit applies Christ and His benefits to the hearts and lives of guilty, elect sinners, through which they are assured by saving faith that Christ belongs to them and they to Him. The Holy Spirit confirms within them God’s promises in Christ. Thus, personal assurance is never divorced from the election of the Father, the redemption of the Son, the application of the Spirit, and the instrumental
tatively different from mere “psychological inwardness” or subjective conviction believed by Holifield and certain other scholars to be at the center of Puritan participation in the Lord’s Supper. To the contrary, “in the sacraments, according to Owen’s view, Christ and His benefits are objectively offered, and received through the exercising of faith and the sovereign agency of the Holy Spirit.”

As Thomas Doolittle writes, every believer pursues assurance when going to the Lord’s Table. They come to the table for the following reasons: “To have communion with God. To increase my faith in Christ and love for God. To further my joy in the Holy Ghost. My peace of conscience and hope of eternal life.... To make me thankful to God for His mercy bestowed upon me in Christ. To get power against my sins. And especially to remember and show for the death of Christ.”

Strong believers, according to Doolittle, demonstrate this pursuit more evidently. They come to the table intending “to have my heart inflamed with love for God and desires after Christ, to have my Savior more endeared to my soul, my heart softened, my sin subdued, my faith strengthened, my evidences cleared, and my soul assured of eternal life.”

Doolittle counsels weak believers to “draw near unto this Table of the Lord, and have a share of these gospel benefits and be assured of them.” “I am persuaded that if you would go unto this ordinance, you would in time hear God speaking peace and comfort to your means of saving faith” (Beeke, Assurance, 60), emphasis original. Meditations on self-examination include Edwards, “Persons Ought to Examine Themselves of their Fitness Before They Presume to Partake of the Lord’s Supper,” in Sermons, 97–109; Joseph Alleine, “Self Examination,” in The Puritans on the Lord’s Supper, 85–109; and Watson, The Lord’s Supper, 39–47.

73. “The sacrament was a seal with which God bound himself to stand to his word, but it worked by evoking a subjective sense of assurance in the mind of the communicant. The emphasis fell on psychological inwardness” (Holifield, The Covenant Sealed, 53).

74. Payne, John Owen on the Lord’s Supper, 75, emphasis added. Payne continues, “As a result, the elect are filled with exuberant thankfulness, nourished and strengthened in faith, assured of God’s infinite love, renewed in obedience, reminded of God’s covenant promises, and given a clearer understanding and experience of union with Christ and the community of believers.”

75. Doolittle, A Treatise Concerning the Lord’s Supper, 139, emphasis added.

76. Ibid., 153, emphasis added.

77. Ibid., 154.
The believer with strong assurance finds complete joy in participating in the sacrament. When I as a believer apprehend “the truth of my faith in Christ, love for God, and hatred of sin, and the promise that God has made to such in Christ,” so surely that “as surely as I ate the bread and drank the wine, so sure has God pardoned my sins and will save my soul.” Additionally, the assured believer finds “the Spirit, God bearing witness to and with my spirit that it was thus with me, and, oh, how sweet was Christ then to my soul!”

The Puritans believed the Lord’s Supper, properly received by faith, “would provide the occasion for the extension of faith.” Watson writes, “Christ gives us his body and blood for the augmenting of faith; he expects that we should reap some profit and income, and that our weak, minute faith should flourish into a great faith.” Owen draws helpful parallels between physical eating and spiritual eating when he preaches that there is “an increase and quickening of the vital principles, there is growth, and there is satisfaction.” Similarly, Edwards writes, “You have been hungry and thirsty in times past, but if you come to this gospel feast you shall hunger and thirst no more.”

Indeed, some come to the Lord’s Table with an inappropriate hunger and thirst, seeking inappropriate “blessings.” This has been a problem for the church since believers in Corinth warranted the Apostle’s letter. As Richard Vines writes, immature believers “look for gifts of prayer, of memory, freedom from passions, some parts or endowments which they see others excel in, and if they do not gain these, they think they gain nothing, as if they were unworthy. Alas, that you should so err!”

Similarly, the neglect of the sacrament when it is available has detrimental consequences. Thomas Doolittle writes that those who neglect the ordinance “will not be so fully, well-groundedly, comfort-

78. Ibid., 156.
79. Ibid., 175.
80. Ibid.
82. Watson, The Lord’s Supper, 68.
ably sure of heaven.”\footnote{86} Those who are able to participate must do so, or their faith will suffer. In this, the Puritan writers’ understanding of the role of the Lord’s Supper is clear: not only does failure to participate lessen the “subjective certainty” of salvation,\footnote{87} but the believer sins in failing to appropriate available means for growth in godliness. Thomas Wadsworth, in a sermon entitled “It Is Every Christian’s Indispensable Duty to Partake of the Lord’s Supper,” writes, “Here is a duty, my brethren, so plain, so easy, of whose obscurity or difficulty certainly we have no cause to complain. For what can be... easier than to eat and drink and call to mind the greatest and best of friends?”\footnote{88} Later, he writes, “think how unmerciful you are to your own souls in denying them this ordinance. What do you but withhold their proper and necessary food from them?”\footnote{89} Doolittle writes, “You are bound to use all means to increase your grace, to enflame your love, to strengthen your faith, to renew your repentance, and to subdue your sin; and you sin if you do not.”\footnote{90} Edward Taylor is even stronger: “You greatly sin in not coming to this holy ordinance. You sin against the invitation; you sin against the wedden garment; you sin against the solemnity, you let it fall; you sin against your own souls, and against your own comfort, for you abstain from that which is your duty wherein spiritual advantage lies.”\footnote{91}

As believers appropriately meditate on the cross of Christ, they are reminded of several things. First, they are reminded that God keeps His promises. Owen believed the sacraments are “instituted of Christ to be visible seals and pledges whereby God in him confirmeth the promises of the covenant to all believers, re-stipulating of them growth in faith and obedience.”\footnote{92} Similarly, Matthew Henry writes, “Give up thyself in sincerity to Jesus Christ, and then come and feast

\footnote{86. Thomas Doolittle, \textit{A Treatise Concerning the Lord's Supper} (Morgan, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1998), 9.}
\footnote{87. “[W]here there is faith in Christ, love for God, and real implacable hatred of sin, there is at least an objective certainty of salvation. There may be a subjective certainty without it, though not so usual, nor so full and constant, if it is willfully neglected where opportunity of receiving it is afforded” (ibid., 43).}
\footnote{88. Thomas Wadsworth, “It Is Every Christian’s Indispensable Duty to Partake of the Lord’s Supper,” in \textit{The Puritans on the Lord’s Supper}, 54.}
\footnote{89. Ibid., 77–78.}
\footnote{90. Doolittle, \textit{A Treatise Concerning the Lord’s Supper}, 18.}
\footnote{91. Taylor, \textit{Edward Taylor’s Treatise}, 186.}
\footnote{92. Owen, \textit{Works}, 1:490.}
with him: thou shalt then have in this ordinance the pledges of his favour, assurances of thy reconciliation to him, and acceptance with him, and all shall be well, for it shall end everlastingly well.”

Believers are also reminded that they are partakers of His body and blood. Calvin writes that “our Lord...instituted the Supper...to sign and seal in our consciences the promises contained in his gospel concerning our being made partakers of his body and blood, and to give us certainty and assurance that therein lies our true spiritual nourishment, and that having such an earnest, we may entertain a right reliance on salvation.”

The sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice, evidenced by the Lord’s Supper, further reminds believers that they no longer face divine condemnation. Those who fear the wrath of God can find reassurance in the sacrament. Owen says, “Look, whatever the justice of God, the law of God, whatever the threatening of God did require to be inflicted as punishment for sin, Christ underwent it all.” Richard Vines writes that the sacrament “is needful for relief of our doubts, fears, and waverings; for this is the great question of anxiety which troubles the soul: Are my sins pardoned? Are my sins blotted out? And God has...instituted this sacrament to resolve this question for the weak in faith.”

Because of this, finally, believers are reminded that they have peace with God. “What is the issue of all this? It is to bring us unto God,—to peace with God, and acquittance from all our sins; and to make us acceptable with the righteous, holy, and faithful God; to give us boldness before him;—this is the issue.”

While Puritan pastors gave believers further meditations and considerations to help them evaluate whether their participation in the Lord’s Supper was sufficient, it should not be assumed that Puritan believers approached the table fearing their participation might

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be insincere. Rather, Puritan believers generally walked away from the table comforted. A role must also be reserved for the Person of the Holy Spirit, who blows wherever He wishes. Since assurance is ultimately His work, believers must not press for a formulaic or mechanical view. And yet Owen uses extravagant language while preaching that “the whole of our comfort depends on our particular receiving of Christ by faith, and carrying him away by believing.”

The visual symbols provide assurance. Payne writes, “This visual representation of Christ crucified, that is, the bread broken and the wine poured out, is meant to move the believer to greater measures of worship, faith, assurance, and obedience.”

How do these sacraments give grace to participants? Owen’s *Greater Catechism* answers, “Not by any real essential conveying of spiritual grace by corporeal means, but by the way of promise, obsignation, and covenant, confirming the grace wrought in us by the Word and Spirit.” Gerrish summarizes this well when he writes, “What [the sacrament] gives is not some mysterious power, but the increase of faith.” That increase of faith is assurance.

**Conclusion**

The Puritans viewed the Lord’s Supper as a means for growing in faith and providing assurance to the believer. They demonstrate this by the standards they set for participation in the Lord’s Table, by the specific practices they promote for those participating in the ordinance, by using the sacrament to oppose the hindrances of assurance, and by their nuanced belief in the objective reality of Christ’s spiritual presence in the sacrament. And they defend this belief by the differing experiences between those who participate in the Lord’s Supper and those who neglect its observance.

Contemporary congregations have much to learn from this emphasis among their spiritual forefathers. If church members came
to our churches with spiritual doubts, wavering in their certainty of God’s promises and wondering if they are personally meant for them, they would receive various types of counsel. Well-meaning friends might begin by inquiring after stressful circumstances in their homes and vocational situations. Well-meaning pastors may ask about the frequency of their Bible reading or the fervency and frequency of their prayers—and appropriately so. Physicians and psychologists may ask about diet and sleep. They may inquire about mental illness, or perhaps prescribe medication to help the believer deal with anxiety.

However, the Puritans would remind the contemporary church of the special role that the Lord’s Supper plays in building the faith of the genuine believer. They join Christ in inviting believers to the great feast of communion with their crucified Lord. They remind believers that they neglect this ordinance from Christ at their peril, and should find delight in His command to “Do this in remembrance of me.”