

Knowing What We Seek and Why We Come¹

Questions and Answers concerning the Communing of Infants and Young Children

Introduction

On that night when our Lord was betrayed, almost immediately after He instituted the sacrament of His Holy Supper, a dispute broke out among the disciples, Saint Luke tells us, a dispute “as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest” (Luke 22:24). We are ashamed to read that before the aroma of this gift of the Lord’s own body and blood had faded from the room, the recipients of this meal should be battling over which of them at the table was the greatest. And yet, we must admit (also with shame), that no small number of disputes has arisen concerning this meal and among His disciples in the days since. There is, in fact, and somewhat ironically, a dispute or at least a very serious conversation going on among the Lord’s disciples today as to who should be *least* at the table, least in the sense not of value or worth but of size and age. Questions of curiosity, interest, concern, and even conscience have been raised not only throughout the church catholic, but among us, as well, in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod with respect to the sharing in the Lord’s Supper of young children and infants.²

We in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod cherish this “holy and precious meal” and hunger for the sustenance and strength it provides us throughout our earthly pilgrimage.³ Since even earthly parents know how to give good gifts to their children, none of us would wish to withhold from our children good gifts from the Lord. Although there is precedent for the practice of paedocommunion in the history of the church, there have always been questions regarding its appropriateness raised by Christians as well. There is today renewed interest in this practice on the part of the church in many places in the world and on the part of some members of the LCMS.

In the hopes of moving forward in a way that might be pleasing to God and satisfying to His church, we will here try to guide the dispute into conversation and let the conversation begin by hearing what our history, our Scriptures, our Confessions, and the needs of those under our care have to say on this important question.

Question 1: *What historical precedent is there for paedocommunion?*

From the information we have available, we must admit that there is no evidence for a widespread practice of paedocommunion in the earliest centuries of the church’s history

¹ Cf. Luther, *Large Catechism*, Fifth Part: The Sacrament of the Altar (line 2): “For we do not intend to admit to the sacrament and administer it to those who do not know what they seek or why they come.” *The Book of Concord*, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 447.

² In order to make the language a little less cumbersome, from this point forward the term *paedocommunion* will be used to refer to the communing of children. The Greek word *παῖς* (*pais*, “a child, a youth”) does not carry very specific age limits with it, so the compound is also somewhat imprecise. Unless qualified by an age, the term will be used in this paper to refer to the communing of children within the age range stretching from infancy to puberty.

³ Cf. “What about the Sacrament of the Altar” by A. L. Barry. Download available at <http://lcms.org/page.aspx?pid=726&DocID=1088>.

following the time of the Apostles. In documents dating from the middle of the third century of our era, there begin to appear references to the practice. The churches that belong to the eastern side of the East-West division of the church have maintained the practice of infant communion since ancient times. In the West, however, the practice waxed and waned in connection with various competing understandings of the Supper and the right reception of it. The practice all but ceased to exist in the western churches around the year 1200, although there continued to be diversity in the age of first communion. In the early 1400s, the followers of John Hus (though not Hus himself apparently) introduced the practice of communing infants along with the practice of giving lay people the cup as well as the host. The Bohemians continued this practice in Luther's day.

In his study, *Confirmation in the Lutheran Church*, Arthur Repp provides a detailed but succinct summary of the practices among Lutherans in the sixteenth century:

[T]he usual age of the catechumen who partook of his first Communion was quite early when compared to present-day [1964] practice. Indeed, age was not regarded an important criterion. The major criterion was the catechumen's readiness to partake of the Sacrament. Almost invariably the church orders used an expression such as "when the children have come of age." According to German law, this was at the age 12; according to Roman canon law, it could be interpreted variously as from 7 to 12.

Where a reference to confirmation age appears, the age is rarely higher than 12. Thus Hohenlohe, 1577, and Ansbach, 1564, specify 12. The same age is suggested by Allstedt, 1533, and Lindow in Pomerania, 1571. The former states that persons over 12 are to be subject to a personal tax, while the latter requires 12-year-olds to contribute to the pastor's support. In both instances, it may be assumed that the age was set at 12 because persons were normally confirmed or communicants by that time. Lower Austria, 1571, sets a range between 10 and 15. Brandenburg-Ansbach-Kulmbach, 1556, indicates that the age for first Communion was to be 12 or over. Braunschweig, 1542, suggests that the former custom of confirming at 10 or 11 be retained. The Church Order of Sweden, drawn up by Laurentius Petri (1499-1573) in 1571, states that no child younger than 9, or 8 at the least, should attend the Lord's Supper. "For younger children can have little exact knowledge of the Sacrament." During the 16th century the children in Denmark were often admitted to Communion when they were only 6 or 7.

This seems to be the limit of verifiable generalizations concerning 16th-century Lutheran confirmation practice.⁴

⁴ Arthur C. Repp, *Confirmation in the Lutheran Church* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), 56-57. Although it cannot be taken for granted that confirmation age was always identical with the age of first communion, Repp's work shows that the norm would have been for the two ages to be the same.

The situation in nineteenth century North America showed little change, except that the influences of rationalism and pietism encouraged later rather than earlier confirmation and, thus, first communion. Repp provides the following excerpt from Löhe's *Agenda*:

Admission to the examination should not be determined by a specified age. In fact few will be mature enough before ten or eleven. One should therefore keep in mind children of this age and older. But this should not eliminate a younger child whom the pastor or parents regard as sufficiently mature, so that he is not turned back simply because of his age... Not age but the required ability of 1 Cor. 11:28 to examine oneself is to be decisive in every case.⁵

In his *Pastoraltheologie*, Walther wrote that “the completion of the twelfth year” is the earliest age (in most cases) at which a child should be confirmed.⁶ The first *Constitution of the German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States* included a quite detailed description of the requirements for confirmation, although no age (minimum or average) was given. The *Constitution* did state: “If possible, up to 100 hours are to be used in confirmation instruction.”⁷

Question 2: *What should we learn from this?*

It is necessary for an informed consideration of these questions that we know our own history with regard to paedocommunion. Because the evidence is scattered, people have formed widely differing conclusions based on the evidence. Some have taken even scattered references to the practice to indicate widespread communion of infants and children throughout many chapters of the church's history; others have seen the absence of regular, widespread references to indicate that the practice was never well established in the West. No doubt, both proponents and opponents of communing infants and young children today will continue to find support for their positions in the historical data. There are two points that are important for us to keep in mind:

1. History alone cannot provide for us a decisive argument for or against paedocommunion. Though we treasure the traditions of our fathers, these traditions like everything else must come under the scrutiny of the sole norm of doctrine and practice among us: the sacred Scriptures.
2. There is clearly no evidence that the communion of infants or very young children was part of the Lutheran reformers' practice. This second point, while not decisive for us, is by no means insignificant. In spite of Luther and the Lutheran reformers' confidence that a right reception of the Supper was being

⁵ Repp, 125-126. Repp provides the following reference to Löhe's *Agenda für christliche Gemeinden des lutherischen Bekenntnisses*: “Found also in the 2d (1859) and the 3d (1884) ed., but dropped in Iowa's 4th ed. (1919).” The original German of the concluding sentence reads: “Nicht das Alter, sondern die 1. Cor. 11,28. geforderte Prüfungsfähigkeit entscheide in allen Fällen.”

⁶ C. F. W. Walther, *Pastoraltheologie*, 5th ed. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1906), 265. Interestingly, Walther cites Luke 2:41-42 in connection with this age guideline.

⁷ “Our First Synodical Constitution,” *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 16:1 (April 1943): 13-14.

restored,⁸ and in spite of their knowledge of the practice of paedocommunion among many Christians in earlier centuries and among the Bohemians in their own time, and in spite of passages that, according to some, show Luther as sympathetic to the practice, Luther and the Lutheran reformers did *not* introduce this practice among their congregations.

Question 3: *What guidance do the Scriptures give us as we consider this practice?*

Our Synod's Commission on Theology and Church Relations has looked carefully at Paul's instructions concerning communion in 1 Corinthians 11. Looking at the proposed support for paedocommunion and then carefully examining Paul's words, the Commission concluded that infants are not capable of the kind of conscious reflection "on their readiness to receive the Lord's body and blood" that Paul's instructions require.⁹ Gregory Lockwood's discussion of 1 Corinthians 11:27-32 also provides helpful exegetical insight into Scripture's instructions concerning the proper reception of the sacrament.¹⁰

As is already apparent, central to the discussion is the understanding of the self-examination required by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:28. Contemporary exegesis has supported the view that, although children may at an early age be able to so examine themselves, infants and very young children have no way to demonstrate that they can complete the kind of self-examination required by the passage. It would, however, be wrong to limit the discussion to this one phrase because there are other significant issues raised by this passage, most notably, the idea of proclaiming the Lord's death that Paul mentions in verse 26. Notice how Paul connects the idea of proclamation with that of remembrance in verses 24 and 25. Anthony Thiselton explains that the combination here of remembering and proclaiming "witnesses to *the participant's self-involving appropriation of the cross both for redemption and lifestyle* as those who *share Christ's death* in order to *share Christ's life*."¹¹ Although this remembering and proclamation certainly includes the action of eating and drinking, Paul's discussion of the lives of the Corinthians individually and together precludes limiting the proclamation of Christ's death to the

⁸Cf., for example, the following passage from "The Sacrament of the Body and Blood of the Lord" in the *Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors in Electoral Saxony* (1528) in *Luther's Works, Volume 40: Church and Ministry II*, ed. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, and H. T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), 289: "Secondly, the people are to be taught that it is right to receive both bread and wine. For now the holy gospel (God be praised) has been restored and we have clear witness that both elements are to be offered and received. For Christ has so ordained, as the three evangelists point out, and St. Paul has so done in the early church, as we see in I Cor. 11[:24f.]. No human being may alter such a divine ordinance. We dare not annul a man's last will, as St. Paul writes in Galatians [Gal. 3:15]. Much less is God's own last testament to be changed."

⁹ Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *Response to "Concerns of South Wisconsin District Circuits 18 and 19 Regarding Infant Communion"* (April 29, 1997), 13.

¹⁰ Gregory J. Lockwood, *1 Corinthians*, Concordia Commentary (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2000), see especially the excursus on pages 407-408. In his discussion of the passage, George Knight provides a careful outline of the surrounding context of these verses, providing valuable help in applying them to the question of paedocommunion. See George W. Knight III, "1 Corinthians 11:17-34: The Lord's Supper: Abuses, Words of Institution and Warnings and the Inferences and Deductions with respect to Paedocommunion," pages 75-95 in *Children and the Lord's Supper*, edited by Guy Waters and Ligon Duncan (Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2011).

¹¹ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 887.

meal itself. It is difficult to see how any of this discussion could be applied meaningfully to infants and very young children.

Question 4: *But don't Luther and the Confessions teach that faith is the only requirement for worthy reception of the sacrament?*

This has indeed been one of the most vigorously asserted points in the discussion among Lutherans. Previous treatments of the material in Luther's writings and in the Confessions need not be repeated here. In the Commission's 1997 response to South Wisconsin District Circuits 18 and 19, a distinction was made between "being worthy to receive the sacrament and a *worthy use* of the sacrament."¹² This statement notes an important distinction. Certainly Paul was writing to baptized believers when he wrote the words of 1 Corinthians that we considered above. Otherwise, would he not have excluded them from future participation until they had become such? And yet, he is clearly denouncing the reception of the sacrament by some members of the baptized and believing community as improper (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:29-30).

How, then, you may wonder, can the Commission's own previous statement about admission to the Lord's Supper speak about faith as the necessary and *sufficient* qualification for worthy reception of the sacrament?¹³ That does appear, at first glance, to be inconsistent.

There is a passage from Luther that is very instructive on this point, and it is perhaps even more pertinent because it has been cited in support of communing infants:

Now anyone who thinks he has this kind of hunger should see to it that he does not deceive himself. He should make sure that it is no mere desire of the human flesh that prompts him. He should examine his faith and determine whether it is genuine, as St. Paul admonishes in I Cor. 11[:28]: "Let a man examine himself." This examination, however, covers your whole life. You must find within yourself a smiting conscience which is weighed down with a sense of sin and longs for the grace of God, a conscience that stands in dread of death or hell and longs for strength, a conscience that seeks and takes the sacrament, firmly relying on Christ's word, in order to receive such grace and strength and help. For as I have said, this sacrament requires a hungry, thirsty, oppressed, and anxious soul, that comes of its own accord, conscious of its own need and thirst, with utter confidence, and without regard to the pope's laws or lawlessness. That is the proof of faith; it is an inward matter.¹⁴

Here, too, Luther speaks of the faith necessary for a right and beneficial reception of the sacrament, but notice the way in which he describes this faith. In this fuller description of faith, Luther shows us that Paul is adding no "second requirement" when he requires *believers* to examine themselves. When this faith is not properly considered or defined, an unworthy use of

¹² Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *Response*, 10.

¹³ Cf. CTCR, *Admission to the Lord's Supper: Basics of Biblical and Confessional Teaching* (November 1999), 32.

¹⁴ Martin Luther, "Receiving Both Kinds in the Sacrament (1522)" *Luther's Works, Volume 36: Word and Sacrament II*, ed. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, and H. T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 263-264.

the sacrament, harmful to both the recipient and the community, may result. It is already difficult to see how Luther's words could be used to describe an infant or small child, even a baptized one, and Luther himself could not discern this kind of faith in infants. The reasoning that, since baptized infants have faith, they must be admitted to the Lord's Supper is even further challenged by the point Luther makes immediately before the statement just quoted:

Therefore, I ask again that all Christians take my advice concerning the sacrament and all other things. First, since Satan through the ordinance of the pope has thrown the sacrament before swine [Matt. 7:6] by compelling everybody to partake of the sacrament at Easter, whether they believe or not, whether they love or not, and since he has also concealed from them the words of the sacrament, on which faith must depend and nourish itself, let us therefore labor first to raise the sacrament above the level of the swine. We do this, however, only as we dissuade and keep the people from it by teaching and exhortation, so that no one goes to the sacrament out of compulsion by, or obedience to, the pope's ordinance. For the sacrament does not admit of people being compelled or driven to it. Rather, instructed by the gospel, people should request and insist upon it of their own accord, because they are driven by the hunger of their believing hearts.¹⁵

For the sake of the recipients and their protection from a wrong reception of the Lord's Supper, Luther prohibits all compulsion or obedience to human authority. People must come of their own accord, driven by their own hunger, requesting and insisting upon this sacrament.

Luther does not find his statement that faith is the proper preparation for the sacrament at all inconsistent with his principle that this faith involves knowing and understanding certain things. As he writes in the *Large Catechism*:

¹As we treated Holy Baptism under three headings, so we must deal with the second sacrament in the same way, stating what it is, what its benefits are, and who is to receive it. All these are established from the words by which Christ instituted it. ²So everyone who wishes to be a Christian and go to the sacrament should be familiar with them. For we do not intend to admit to the sacrament and administer it to those who do not know what they seek or why they come.¹⁶

Question 5: *Are we denying the weakest and most vulnerable children of God the gift of His grace by not communing them?*

John Pless has answered this question in a very simple and straightforward way in his "Theses on Infant/Toddler Communion":

4. Arguments for infant/toddler communion bypass the truth that in Baptism, we receive "victory over death and the devil, forgiveness of sin, God's grace, the entire Christ, and the Holy Spirit with his gifts" (LC IV:41–42, Kolb/Wengert, 461) as though the promise of Baptism remained

¹⁵Martin Luther, "Receiving Both Kinds," 263.

¹⁶LC, Fifth Part, 1-2; Tappert 447.

unfulfilled without the Lord's Supper. By waiting until children have been instructed, examined, and absolved before admitting them to the Lord's Supper, they are not being deprived of Christ.

In the New Testament and the Lutheran Confessions, Baptism is not an event in a series of "rites of initiation" that is left incomplete without participation in the sacrament [of the altar]. Instead Baptism bestows the "entire Christ" and encompasses the whole life of the believer. Not only is it foundational, but it is also enduring in the life of [the] Christian. The teaching that our Lord attaches to Baptism (see Matt. 28:16–20) surely leads the baptized to eat and drink his body and blood as the Lord bestows his gifts in more than one way, but infants and young children are not deprived of Christ before this teaching has been accomplished.

Pless continues:

Maxwell E. Johnson, himself an advocate of infant communion, notes that through a coupling of John 3:5 (unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom) and John 6:53 (Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man) into a single *logion* in the *traditio fidei*, both Baptism and the Lord's Supper are made necessary for membership in the Christian community.¹⁷ [In contrast], the Lutheran Confessions do not operate with what might be called a "unitive" understanding of the sacraments. Baptism is the rebirth into the body of Christ as in it sins are forgiven and the Holy Spirit bestowed. The Lord's Supper is not an additive to Baptism but serves instead to strengthen the Christian in the forgiveness of sins according to the word and promise of Christ to which faith clings.¹⁸

Todd Nichol raises an additional and serious question in response to those who feel that not admitting infants to the supper is "denying them" or "leaving them out":

When the question of communing infants arises, it is frequently referred not to the norms of the church, but to the realm of sentiment. Rhetorical inquiries like "Can we leave the children out?" and "Can we deny them food when they reach for it?" are questions regularly assumed to be arguments. It has only rarely been asked: "Can we expose them to the possibility not only of blessings so great, but of judgment so severe?"¹⁹

¹⁷ Maxwell Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 68–69.

¹⁸ John T. Pless, "Theses on Infant/Toddler Communion" (Blogia. The Blog of *Logia: A Journal of Lutheran Theology*, October 31, 2013), bolded section in original. An example of a "unitive" view, and one that highlights the contrast with the Lutheran understanding of Baptism, is the statement of the Orthodox view by Thomas Hopko: "But to baptize anyone, according to the Orthodox understanding, without Chrismation and Holy Communion following immediately is like being born without living." Cf. Thomas Hopko, "Children and Holy Communion," *Lutheran Forum* 30:4 (1996): 33.

¹⁹ Todd W. Nichol, "Infant Communion in Light of the Lutheran Confessions," *Lutheran Quarterly* n.s. 10:3 (1996): 245.

Question 6: *How do we best exercise our stewardship of this great treasure that our Lord has entrusted to us?*

We have been unable to find any reason to commune our infants and very young children. No exegetical, systematic, confessional, historical, or pastoral argument was found to either require or encourage such a practice among us. The understanding of the Lord's Supper—its nature and its benefits—that we have derived from our study has confirmed the reformers' practice of continuing to require the sort of careful self-examination required by Saint Paul and, more importantly, by the Lord who spoke through Saint Paul and whose Supper this is. For the sake of those being examined, careful, thorough, and life-long instruction was to be provided. The insistence seen on the part of the reformers and of our synodical fathers that such examination conclude with confession and absolution is perfectly in line with the Apostolic and Dominical instructions concerning the worthy and beneficial reception of the sacrament. The pattern for baptized children in Lutheran congregations has been clear and consistent until very recently: instruction was followed by examination leading to confession, absolution, and the reception of the Lord's body and blood. As more and more groups promote the Eucharist for all the baptized or simply the Eucharist for all, it becomes all the more important that we remain faithful stewards in our own generation of the mysteries entrusted to us. At the same time, ongoing study of our understanding of the sacrament and of the resulting understanding of its worthy reception can only be beneficial, provided it is carried out under the supervision of the supreme norm of our thought and practice, the Holy Scriptures, and informed by their faithful and true exposition, the Lutheran Confessions.

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