

THESES ON INFANT/TODDLER COMMUNION

Logia - October 31, 2013

—by John T. Pless

1. The question of admission to the Lord's Supper is addressed from the instituting words of the Lord, which also disclose the purpose and beneficial use of the sacrament.

Jesus' words tell us what the sacrament is, his body and blood given Christians to eat and to drink for the forgiveness of their sins. As Luther puts it: "We know, however, that it is the Lord's Supper, and is called thus, not the Christians' supper. For the Lord not only instituted it, but also prepares and administers it himself, and is himself cook, waiter, food and drink."¹ The sacrament is to be received in "remembrance" of the One who instituted it, that is, in faith trusting in his gracious words, "given and shed for you." The sacrament itself is the preaching of the Gospel. It is misused when it turned into an enactment of inclusiveness or thought of as the impartation of a mystical energy through the act of eating and drinking. Arguments for the communion of infants and toddlers tend to drive a wedge between "take eat, take drink" and trust in "these words, given and shed for you." It is not simply eating and drinking that constitute the salutary use of the sacrament but eating and drinking accompanied by trust in Christ's words, that is, the explicit promise of his Supper.

2. The apostolic teaching that a man examine himself (I Corinthians 11:28) cannot reasonably be interpreted as to exclude the noetic dimension of which infants/toddlers are not capable.

Paul speaks of self-examination in verse 28 in conjunction with "discerning" (*diakrino*) the body in verse 29. Both BAGD and Kittel demonstrate that this term means to separate, arrange, make a distinction, differentiate, evaluate, judge.² This text cannot be dismissed by limiting its application to the original context of the Corinthian congregation as Wolfhart Pannenberg does when he asserts, "The self-examination that I Corinthians 11:28 demands does not relate primarily to the individual moral state but to the breaches of fellowship that ought not exist between members of the body of Christ."³ While the apostle is certainly addressing and correcting these breaches of fellowship enacted in the way the rich assert their priority over the poor, he does so on the basis that this is no ordinary meal but a communion in the body and blood of the Lord. Communicants are not to eat and drink without the discernment of this reality.⁴

3. Baptism is an absolute prerequisite for admission to the Lord's Supper, but it does not follow that all the baptized are categorically to be admitted to the altar.

The slogan "Communion is the birthright of the baptized," sometimes used to assert that all the baptized are entitled to eat and drink in the Lord's Supper, is not only problematic in making admission to the Lord's Supper a "right" rather than a gift, but it also misses the point that for numerous reasons baptized Christians are excluded from the Lord's Table. Those under church discipline are barred from the altar as are those do not share in the confession of a particular altar. Infants and toddlers who have not yet been taught the faith and examined on the basis of this teaching are not admitted to the Supper. As Werner Elert notes, "Even though a man must first be baptized before he may partake of the Holy Communion, this does not mean that all the baptized may without distinction partake of the Eucharist together."⁵ The baptized are to be taught according to the Lord's bidding (see Matt. 28:19–20). This teaching leads to the sacrament not vice versa.

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 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. 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 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. Here note Craig Koester: "The Lord's Supper was instituted for 'for the forgiveness of sins' to be received with a discerning faith. Adults and children who recognize their sin and seek forgiveness should be encouraged to partake of the meal. Since infants are not capable of recognizing sin or desiring forgiveness, they should not participate in the Supper. The grace given in Baptism is sufficient for them at this early stage of their lives. It is when they reach the point where they recognize

the need for forgiveness for their sins that they should be instructed and encouraged to take, eat, and drink of Christ's body and blood at the Lord's table."⁶

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.⁷ Unlike Cyprian (and Augustine for that matter), 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.

5. Faith does not make the sacrament, but it is only by faith that the benefits of the sacrament are received. Faith is precisely trust in these words, "given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins" (SC). In the *Small Catechism*, eating and drinking are joined together with trust in the spoken word, "given and shed for you." The Lord's Supper is given precisely to strengthen the faith of those who through the accusation of the Law recognize their sin and whose terrorized consciences acknowledge their need and desire the forgiveness of their sins. "For people are admitted only if they have first had an opportunity to be examined (*explorati*) and heard. The people are also reminded about the dignity and use of the sacrament—how it offers great consolation to anxious consciences—so that they may learn to believe in God and expect all that is good from God" (AC XXIV:6–7, Latin, K/W, 68).⁸

Eating and drinking the Lord's body and blood *worthily* requires instruction. Admitting the uninstructed and therefore unexamined, whether they are adults or infants was out of the question for Luther. Already in 1522, Luther provides descriptive template for the structure of the Catechism: "Thus the commandments teach man to recognize his sickness, enabling him to perceive what he must do or refrain from doing, consent to or refuse, and so he will recognize himself a sinful and wicked person. The Creed will teach and show him where to find the medicine—grace—which will help him to become devout and keep the commandments. The Creed points him to God and his mercy, given and made plain to him in Christ. Finally, the Lord's Prayer teaches all this, namely, through the fulfillment

of God's commandments everything will be given him. In these three are the essentials of the entire Bible.”⁹ Instruction in and confession of these essentials of the Christian faith are a prerequisite for admission to the Lord’s Supper. Four years after writing the Catechisms in 1533 in his “An Open Letter to Those in Frankfurt on the Main” Luther writes, “It is quite true that wherever the preacher administers only bread and wine for the sacrament, he is not very concerned about to whom he gives it, what they know or believe, or what they receive. . . . However, because we are concerned about nurturing Christians who will still be here after we are gone, and because it is Christ’s body and blood that are given out in the sacrament, we will not and cannot give such a sacrament to anyone unless he is first examined regarding what he has learned from the Catechism and whether he intends to forsake the sins which he has again committed. For we do not want to make Christ’s church into a pig pen [Matthew 7:6], letting each one come unexamined to the sacrament as a pig to its trough. Such a church we leave to the Enthusiasts!”¹⁰

Often left out of the discussion of infant/toddler communion is the aspect of the terrorized conscience, which Luther includes as a dimension of the examination of communicants. Examination includes exploration of why it is that the body and blood are needed. Lutheran practice should be both catechetical (the communicant should have knowledge of the basic texts and how to use them) and diagnostic (the communicant should have an awareness of his/her sin). The communicant should know what the sacrament is and how the body and blood of the Lord are to be used against the conscience which is afflicted by sin.

6. The Lutheran Confessions assert that none are to be admitted to the sacrament who have not been instructed, examined, and absolved. See LC V:1–3, K/W, 467; AC XXV:1–3, K/W, 73.

Arthur Carl Piepkorn summarizes the position of the Lutheran Confessions: “Communicants are to know from memory at least the Decalog, the Creed, the Our Father, and the words of institution of Holy Baptism and the Sacrament of the Altar.”¹¹ Evidence for Piepkorn’s assertion may be seen in the Large Catechism where Luther writes, “All this is established from the words Christ used to institute it [the Lord’s Supper]. So everyone who wishes to be a Christian and to go to the sacrament should know 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” (LC V:1–2, K/W, 467). Near the end of this section of the Large Catechism, Luther does speak of children (not infants!) being instructed in the Catechism so that they

may come to the Supper: "Therefore let all heads of a household remember that it is their duty, by God's injunction and command, to teach their children or have them taught the things that they ought to know. Because they have been baptized and received into the people of Christ, they should also enjoy this fellowship of the sacrament so that they may serve us and be useful" (LC V:87, K/W, 87). Article XXV of the Augsburg Confession coheres with the Large Catechism: "For it is not our custom to administer the body of Christ except to those who have been previously examined and absolved" (AC XXV:1, K/W, 73).

7. Lutheran theology does not begin with a generic category of sacraments but works instead from the Lord's mandates for Baptism and the Supper. Each has its own distinctive features. They are not interchangeable. It does not follow that arguments for the baptism of infants are to be applied for the communion of infants/toddlers.

Neither the New Testament nor the Lutheran Confessions operate with a generic definition of "sacrament" but instead begin with the Lord's instituting words for Holy Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and Absolution. What might qualify under the heading of "sacrament" is rather elastic, but it is clear that Baptism and the Lord's Supper are not interchangeable. What applies to one does not necessarily apply to the other. Baptism is administered once for incorporation into the one body of Christ, while the Lord provides his Supper to be administered time after time to strengthen believers in the forgiveness of sins.

8. The Lord's Supper is the new testament of the Lord, not the new Passover. Hence it does not follow that because infants/toddlers were included in the Passover meal that they are to be communed.

Paul G. Bretscher sees the inclusion of infants in the Passover seder as a grounds for their admission to the Lord's Supper. In a paper first presented at the Institute of Liturgical Studies at Valparaiso University in 1963 and subsequently published in *Una Sancta*, Bretscher writes, "Little children, even infants, were never excluded from the history itself which worship is designed to relive and recover! In the case of Ancient Israel it is ridiculous even to imagine such a possibility. When that first Passover was celebrated in Egypt, and God commanded all Israel to keep it, did they leave the babies out of the house? Or, when they ate of the roasted lamb and unleavened bread, did they deny this food to their

children? When they left the land and crossed the Red Sea and made their way through the wilderness, were the children left behind? It is interesting to note that Pharaoh at one point during the plagues offered to let the men go but not the children (Exodus 10:7–11, 24). The children must be participants in the saving history.”¹² Bretscher’s desire for inclusivity presses the argument without regard to the obvious, namely, that an infant would choke on such food. On a deeper level, Bretscher operates with a faulty theology of worship as “reliving” a past event.

Following in the wake of Odo Casel, Louis Bouyer asserts in a discussion of Luke 22:19, “Far from needing or not needing to create a new rite for future use, Our Lord was only performing again a very ancient rite which, even without him, his disciples would have certainly gone on performing so long as they lived together. What our Lord intended by these words was to give new meaning to this old rite.”¹³ However, this approach fails to acknowledge the newness of the New Testament in what Christ bestows—his body and blood for disciples to eat and to drink. Norman Nagel would often point out that when we line up the Passover as described in Exodus with the narratives of the Lord’s Supper’s institution in the synoptics and I Corinthians, the first and crucial question is not how are they similar, but how are they different? This is also Luther’s approach in the Large Catechism. To paraphrase Sasse, the Lord’s Supper renders the old Passover obsolete.¹⁴ Likewise Mark Throntveit writes, “Jesus ‘fulfills’ the Old Testament Passover, but not by instituting the Lord’s Supper in ritual continuity with the Old Testament seder. By dying on the cross, Jesus ‘fulfills’ the Old Testament Passover in the sense of bringing it to an end, thereby becoming the last paschal lamb, ‘the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.’ ”¹⁵

The nature of the Passover does not establish a basis for communing infants and toddlers any more than it provides a basis for a yearly celebration of the Lord’s Supper or making the appropriate setting of the sacrament the family dining room rather than the church. Here also see Luther in the Large Catechism where he argues that the Sacrament of the Altar is not like the old Passover bound to a special time but frequently where there is “opportunity and need” and not like “the pope (who) perverted it and turned it back into a Jewish feast” (LC V:47–48, K/W, 471–472).

9. Evidence for the communion of infants/toddlers in the early and medieval church is there in some places, but it is not clear that the practice was universal or when it was first practiced. Lutheran

liturgical practice is not based on historical precedent but on the Lord's mandates. Not all practices of the early church are to be emulated. Infant/toddler communion is one of those practices.

That infants were communed in some places in ancient Christianity is not disputed, but to assert that it was a universal practice or that it is normative for historical reasons exceeds the evidence. Marc Kolden writes, "Infant communion was not widely practiced in the early church. Indeed, this practice only became more common later and then for questionable historical reasons. The first mention of it is by Cyprian in about AD 250, but it does not appear to have been well established. Origen, for example, notes that infants were not communed in his church."¹⁶ Likewise, Justin and Cyril of Jerusalem cast doubt on the communing of infants.¹⁷

The Lutheran Confessions honor the church fathers. When their testimony is in agreement with Holy Scripture, they are gratefully cited as confessing the apostolic faith. However the Confessions also realize that the teachings of the patristic writers are fallible. They can and do disagree with one another. They certainly do not represent an unbroken continuity with the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures, which alone are the rule and norm for church teaching and practice. The fact that one or another or even the majority of patristic writers support the communion of infants does not establish the practice for Evangelical Lutherans. Unlike the Lutheran Confessions, which are received because they are in agreement with sacred Scriptures, the church fathers are received in so far as they concur with the biblical Word.

10. Arguments for infant/toddler reveal a problematic hermeneutic of the Lutheran Confessions, which undercut a *quia* understanding of confessional subscription.

Given the numerous references in the Book of Concord to the nature and benefit of the Lord's Supper as well as the need for catechetical and diagnostic examination prior to admission to the Lord's Supper, one cannot endorse the communion of infants/toddlers while maintaining an unqualified subscription to the Lutheran Confessions. To claim otherwise yields a completely ahistorical reading of the Confessions. Such a reading avoids both the meaning of the confessional texts and the actual practices of those who wrote them.

11. Luther may not be cited in support of infant/toddler communion. He knew of the practice among the Hussites and while he would not condemn them as heretics (those who deny the fundamental Christological and Trinitarian dogma), he did not accept their practice as correct.

On occasion, Luther's comments recorded in a "table talk" in 1532 are cited in support of infant communion. Apart from the fact that these comments were made in rather "off the cuff" fashion and that it that they were recorded by auditors at the table, Luther's words as we have them do not speak of the communing of infants but of children. In response to the question, whether the Lord's Supper should be given to children, the Reformer replies that "there is no urgency about the sacrament of the altar" and then refers to I Corinthians 11: "When in I Corinthians [11:28] Paul said that a man should examine himself, he spoke only of adults because he was speaking about those who were quarreling among themselves. However, he doesn't here forbid that the sacrament of the altar be given even to children."¹⁸ Luther notes that contextually, the I Corinthians 11 pericope is not addressing children but adults. However, given the range of Luther's other statements regarding the need for examination undergirded by teaching, it is quite a jump to conclude from this statement that he endorses the communion of infants. Children are capable of instruction and examination in a way that infants are not.

Luther was aware that the Bohemian Brethren (Hussites) admitted infants to the Holy Communion.¹⁹ While Luther did not condemn them as heretics for this practice, he clearly did not approve of the practice as in the same letter he speaks of communicants being examined and responding concerning their faith.

12. Infant/toddler communion is a novel practice in the Lutheran Church. In American Lutheranism, it gained traction only in the 1970's as it was fueled by particular aspects of the liturgical and ecumenical movements.

Frank Senn has chronicled the move toward infant communion in the predecessor bodies of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America noting the influence of these movements.²⁰ In regard to the liturgical movement, the work of Eugene Brand, an architect of the *Lutheran Book of Worship* and chief drafter of its baptismal rite indicates the connection as can be seen in his essay, "Baptism and the Communion of Infants: A Lutheran View."²¹ Ecumenically, the World Council of Churches

consultation at Bad Segeberg in Germany concluded, “If children are incorporated into the body of Christ through baptism, then they belong to the whole body of Christ. As there is no partial belonging to the body of Christ, children must also have a part in the eucharist.”²² The dual trajectories of ritual participation derived from early church practices (liturgical movement) and inclusiveness in the one body of Christ (ecumenical movement) converged in providing a platform for a change in Lutheran practice.

13. The fact that children who have been instructed, examined, and absolved may be admitted to the sacrament at a younger age than has been the general custom in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is not to be confused with the admitting of infants/toddlers to the Altar. Churchly and pastoral concerns for unity in practice are important considerations. But the communion of infants/toddlers is not an adiaphoron to be left up to individual parents, pastors, or congregations.

The *Lutheran Service Book Agenda* makes provision for the admission of children to the Lord’s Supper prior to Confirmation with this stipulation: “Candidates for admission to the Lord’s Supper have learned the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer. They have received careful instruction in the Gospel and sacraments. Confessing their sin and trusting in their Savior, they desire to receive the Lord’s Supper for the forgiveness of sins and strengthening of their faith in Christ and their love toward others,” and “Baptized Christians are admitted to the sacrament when they have been examined and absolved by their pastor in accordance with the practice outlined in the Augsburg Confession (Article XXV)” (*LSBA*, 25). Younger children who have learned these texts, know what the sacrament is and why they need it and have been examined by the pastor may be communed prior to the rite of confirmation. Concern for unity of practice especially as families move from one place to another would dictate that a common form of instruction and examination be used by pastors within our fellowship. The material in the *Pastoral Care Companion* under “Guidelines for Pastoral Examination of Catechumens—Before the Rite of First Communion” (PPC, 664–70) provides such an instrument. In congregations where children are admitted to the Lord’s Supper prior to Confirmation, it is the responsibility of the pastor to see to it that such instruction is given and candidates are examined accordingly.

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1. LW 37:129–30. ↩
2. See Walter Bauer, William Arndt, Fredrick Danker, and F. Wilbur Gingrich. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 231 and Gerhard Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Volume III, translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 946–49. ↩
3. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*-Volume 3, translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 327. ↩
4. For more here, see Gregory Lockwood, *Concordia Commentary: I Corinthians* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2000), 405–8. Also see Jeffrey Gibbs, “An Exegetical Case for Close(d) Communion: I Corinthians 10:14–22, 11:17–34” *Concordia Journal* (April 1995), 148–63. ↩
5. Werner Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*, translated by Norman E. Nagel (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966), 80. ↩
6. Craig Koester, “Infant Communion in Light of the New Testament” *Lutheran Quarterly* (Autumn 1996), 238. ↩
7. Maxwell Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: The Evolution and Interpretation* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 68–69. ↩
8. The Augsburg Confession continues the same trajectory set by Luther in 1523 in his “An Order of Mass and Communion for the Church at Wittenberg” where he outlines how those who would commune are to be examined: “But I think it enough for the applicants for communion to be examined or explored once a year. Indeed a man may be so understanding that he needs to be questioned only once in his lifetime or not at all. For, by this practice, we want to guard lest the worthy and unworthy alike rush to the Lord’s Supper, as we have hitherto seen done in the Roman church. There they seek only to communicate; but the faith, the comfort, the use and benefit of the Supper are not even mentioned or considered. Nay, they have taken pains to hide the Words of Institution, which are the bread of life itself, and have furiously tried to make the

communicants perform a work, supposedly good in itself, instead of letting their faith be nourished and strengthened by the goodness of Christ. Those, therefore, who are not able to answer in the manner described above should be completely excluded and banished from the communion of the Supper, since they are without the wedding garment [Matt. 22:11–12]” LW 53:33. Just a bit later in the same work, Luther continues, “They should request in person to receive the Lord’s Supper so that he may be able to know both their names and manner of life. And let him not admit the applicants unless they can give a reason for their faith and can answer questions about what the Lord’s Supper is, what its benefits are, and what they expect to derive from it. In other words, they should be able to repeat the Words of Institution from memory and to explain that they are coming because they are troubled by the consciousness of their sin, the fear of death, or some other evil, such as temptation of the flesh, the world, or the devil, and now hunger and thirst to receive the word and sign of grace and salvation from the Lord himself through the ministry of the bishop, so that they may be consoled and comforted; this was Christ’s purpose, when he in priceless love gave and instituted this Supper, and said, ‘Take and eat,’ etc.” (34). ↵

9. Martin Luther, “Personal Prayer Book” LW 43:14. ↵
10. Martin Luther, “An Open Letter to Those in Frankfurt on the Main” *Concordia Journal* (October 1990), 343. ↵
11. Arthur Carl Piepkorn, *What the Symbolic Books of the Lutheran Church Have to Say about Worship and the Sacraments* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1952), 37. ↵
12. Paul G. Bretscher, “First Things First: The Question of Infant Communion” *Una Sancta* (Advent 1963), 37. ↵
13. Bouyer, *The Christian Mystery from Pagan Myth to Christian Mystery*, translated by Illtyrd Trethowan, (Edinburgh; T & T Clark 1990), 122–23. ↵
14. Here see, Hermann Sasse, “The Lord’s Supper in the New Testament” in *We Confess the Sacraments*, translated by Norman E. Nagel (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1985), 49–97. Sasse observes that “all the details of the traditional Passover ritual, which Jesus doubtless observed, was irrelevant for the Lord’s Supper itself” (64). And again since Jesus himself is the Passover Lamb who gives his body and blood to be eaten and drunk, Sasse argues that “there is no analogy to this fellowship, just as there are no parallels to this celebration. The Lord’s Supper received this character as something unique, something remarkable from the

- Words of Institution" (66). Also see Otto Procksch, "Passa und Abenmahl" in *Vom Sakrament des Altars*, (Leipzig: Dörffling and Franke, 1941), 11–25. ↩
15. Mark Throntveit, "The Lord's Super as New Testament, Not New Passover" *Lutheran Quarterly*(Autumn 1997), 284. ↩
 16. Marc Kolden, "Infant Communion in Light of Theological and Pastoral Perspectives" *Lutheran Quarterly* (Autumn 1996), 249–50. ↩
 17. Mark Tranvik, "Should Infants be Communed? A Lutheran Perspective" *Word & World* (Winter 1995), 86. ↩
 18. LW 54:58. ↩
 19. Here see, Thomas A. Fudge, "Hussite Infant Communion" *Lutheran Quarterly* (Autumn 1996), 176–94. ↩
 20. See Frank Senn, "Issues in 'Infant Communion' " in *A Stewardship of the Mysteries* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 155–70. ↩
 21. Here see Eugene Brand, "Baptism and the Communion of Infants: A Lutheran View" in *Living Water, Sealing Spirit: Readings on Christian Initiation*, edited by Maxwell Johnson (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1995), 350–64. ↩
 22. Senn, 164. ↩

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