

INFANT COMMUNION? THEN WHAT IS COMMUNION? OR BAPTISM?

The Use of the Means of Grace (hereafter UMG) does not actually recommend, though it may seem to, that newly baptized infants be communed at the time of their baptisms and from then on without interruption but rather that they be communed “for the time during the service in which they are baptized” but not again “on a regular basis” until they “can start to respond to the gift of Christ in the supper.” (C3.6a,l7) Yet even that minimal proposal reflects a dubious understanding both of Holy Communion and of Baptism. How much more dubious is that widespread notion that Infant Communion means infants be communed “on a regular basis,” Sunday after Sunday. Whether they should or shouldn’t be, what is at stake is the bigger question, What is Holy Communion? What is Holy Baptism?

1. UMG’s proposal concerning infant communion claims that that “is presently the practice in the Orthodox communion.” (Ibid.) Is that indeed Orthodox practice –not Orthodox doctrine but Orthodox practice? Yes and no.
 - a. Orthodox babies do receive Communion at baptism but not without simultaneously being “confirmed” (chrismated.) Even though our Lutheran baptismal rite also provides for anointing with oil, as a “sign,” this modest “chrism” of ours does not function nearly as centrally as does the Orthodox confirmation. But by the some token we in the West intentionally defer confirmation, because it is so central, until the child “can start to respond to the gift of Christ in the supper.” That is, we too link communion and confirmation, but only at an age when faith appears.

b. Why, in Orthodoxy, Must the baby be confirmed in order to be communed? In Orthodox practice, it seems, “confirmation” at the time of baptism is believed to render the baby “worthy.” Still, even that initial worthiness does not suffice once the child turns seven. From then on, to qualify for Communion, the Orthodox sinner must first go to Confession, a requirement which many, many Orthodox decline – except once a year, on Holy Thursday. For they fear, as more than one communicant informed me, that in Confession the priest would prescribe that they change their lifestyle. So instead they are resigned to remain “unworthy,” hence ineligible for the Holy Communion. That is why it is not uncommon that the very parents who hold the baby for her first communion do not themselves commune. Nor is she herself likely to, except on rare occasions, after age seven.

c. But if the Orthodox “practice” of infant Communion seems badly to distort what Paul meant by communing “unworthily” (anaksioos, I Cor. 11:27) it does expose in us modern Westerners the direct flipside of the selfsame fallacy: we have practically deleted from Holy Communion any consideration of “worthiness” at all. Antinomianism is just the kneejerk flipside of legalism, zigging where the other one zags. There is evidence of that even in UMG. In its whole long, wonderful section on Holy Communion it says almost nothing about the forgiveness of sin.

2. What for Paul makes the communicants’ eating and drinking “unworthy” is a) their failure to “discern [Christ’s] body” and b) simultaneously their failure to “judge” themselves. (The point is not, Which body – Christ’s

edible-drinkable body, or his church? The text clearly says both, and both at once.)

- a. What does Paul mean by a) “discerning” (Christ) and b) “judging” (oneself)? Does that mean, as we like to scoff, “intellectual knowledge?” If so, that of course would rule out tiny tots. What “discerning” / “judging” does mean in this context is a basic personal acquaintance a) with the Person we’re imbibing, namely, Jesus Christ, and b) with the persons he is feeding, namely, ourselves as sinners.
 - b. Elsewhere this is what Paul calls faith, which is always both a) Christ-trusting and b) self-examining. I think I’ve perceived that sort of faith even in four- or five-year-olds – maybe more vividly than in many seventy-five year olds – though not in all five-year-olds. And certainly not in infants.
 - c. It all depends on how well the two, Christ and his sinful little brother or sister, have become acquainted, post-baptism. And that depends on the Church’s other, post-baptismal means of grace: the gospel. Faith – sinners’ faith in Christ – Is not innate, “animal faith.”
3. For Lutherans at least (also for many other infant baptism churches) it is not essential to teach that infants, immediately upon being baptized, have faith. (They may also not have unfaith, though sin they have aplenty, mortally.) Still, they are meant to come to faith eventually, and more and more, precisely by taking heart from their baptisms.
- a. It isn’t that baptism infuses faith into the infant mechanically, ex opere operato like a penicillin shot. Her baptism is rather, as The Large Catechism explains, a reassuring “object” at the beginning of her life toward which she constantly looks back,

from which she takes her bearing through all her year, ahead, off of which her faith lives and grows.

b. Baptism is that wondrous landmark on the receding shore which the sailor leaves behind, never taking his eyes off of it as he rows out into the thick fog of the future, his back to the wind, not needing to look where he is going. For that old font back yonder, where he was once and for all crucified and raised with Jesus Christ in his own baptismal version of Good Friday and Easter, is not only the defining moment from which he is coming but the goal, the eschaton, to which he – with all the saints – is going. His future is a thing of the past, long ago anticipated in his baptism. That is how baptism grows faith, not instantaneously but year after year, as Luther's joyous objectum or (to mix metaphors) our lifelong rearview mirror.

4. I suspect that a lot of fuzzy thinking about infant communion comes from this bad syllogism: The sacrament of Baptism is for all ages, even infants; Holy Communion is also a sacrament; therefore, Holy Communion must also be for infants.

a. True, we do quite properly detect similarities between Holy Baptism and Holy Communion, enough so as to lump them together under the umbrella term, "sacrament." So what if the New Testament never does that. It is still a useful way of saying that the two transactions are alike at least in this respect, they are both "rites commanded by God with the promise of grace" (Apol. XIII,3) even though they may not have much in common beyond that.

b. The time has come to point out also how these two "sacraments" differ.

i. Baptism does not bear repeating, Holy

Communion does.

- ii. Infant Baptism does not need the beneficiary's consent, Holy Communion does.
- iii. For Infant Baptism to eventuate in faith it needs the other means of grace; for Holy Communion, though it strengthens faith, faith is already a given.
- iv. Though we baptize infants we do not preach to them or hear their confession (let alone ordain them); with communicants we do.
- v. Even though infants may not (yet) be able to handle Holy Communion, Holy Baptism is able to handle infants.
- vi. In Baptism the member of the Trinity who predominates is the Holying Spirit, in Holy Communion it is the Incarnate Son.

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