



Should Infants Be Communed? A Lutheran Perspective

MARK D. TRANVIK

*Luther Seminary
St. Paul, Minnesota*

AMONG THE MORE WELCOME TRENDS IN CHURCHES IS THE EFFORT TO INCLUDE children in worship. While some of the methods used to accomplish this are dubious (one colleague who used a live donkey for a children's sermon was horrified when the beast fouled the chancel), most would agree the presence of pig-tailed preschoolers squirming restlessly in the pews is a sign of congregational health and reflects a fuller understanding of what it means to be the body of Christ. Anyone who has listened to a seven-year-old belt out Charles Wesley's "Let All Things Now Living" or watched a youngster peer wide-eyed as a baby is baptized knows exactly what I mean.

The inclusion of children in worship has also meant that they are regularly brought forward to the altar for a blessing during holy communion. It is now being suggested in some quarters of the church that this blessing is not sufficient. For reasons that will be elaborated below, some have proposed that infants and young children should also be communed, even where this has not been part of the tradition. In this article I want to look at the reasons for and against infant communion. My goal is to provide pastors and lay leaders with some ways to think about this issue and ultimately to offer arguments why infant communion rests uneasily with a Lutheran understanding of the sacraments.

I. ARGUMENTS IN FAVOR

Those who favor infant communion often point to four arguments in support

MARK D. TRANVIK is a Lutheran pastor and director of admissions at Luther Seminary. He recently received his Th.D. with a dissertation on Lutheran sacramental theology.

of their position: (1) a new understanding of what it means to “discern the body” in 1 Cor 11:29; (2) the history of the early church; (3) the logic of communing infants the church is committed to baptizing; (4) the “inclusive” nature of the Lord’s supper. Let us look at each of these reasons in more detail.

1. *Discerning the body*

1 Cor 11:23-29 is the *locus classicus* for those involved in the infant communion debate. In this passage Paul gives the church in Corinth some guidelines for how to eat the Lord’s supper. Paul’s admonition to “discern the body” (v. 29) before eating has traditionally been thought to mean that some sort of intellectual apprehension of Christ’s presence was necessary before one could partake in the supper, and thus infants could not be communed. Infant communion proponents stress, however, that the “body” Paul referred to was not the mode of Christ’s presence in the meal but rather (given the raucous Corinthian communion practices) an actual reference to the people gathered at the table and the need to be inclusive of the poor and weak. Many recent exegetes have tended to prefer this ecclesial understanding of “body” as opposed to a sacramental one.¹

2. *Historical precedents*

Infant communion has had a checkered history in the church. In the patristic period, much of the evidence is still shrouded in mystery. It is clear that the eastern churches adopted the practice of infant communion and continue that tradition up to the present day. In the west there are references to infant communion in the writings of Cyprian and Augustine. Historians dispute how widespread the practice was. However, it endured until the eleventh century, an age associated with a strong sacramental realism that would eventually develop into the doctrine of transubstantiation. In essence, this meant that when the cup was withheld from the laity (for fear of spilling the blood of Christ), the practice of communing infants was discontinued because they were unable to eat the host.²

Hence in the west infants have not been communed for nearly a millennium. Following the abandonment of infant communion, it has been Roman Catholic practice to wait until a so-called “age of reason,” usually defined as seven. The churches of the reformation have not standardized a particular age.³ Children have communed as early as the age of six. In other cases first communion has been delayed until the completion of confirmation, which could mean waiting until well into the teens. The present norm in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, inherited from predecessor bodies, is fifth grade, although it should be noted that practices in individual congregations vary widely.

¹Charles Anderson and Eric Gritsch, “An Exchange of Letters on Communing Infants,” *Lutheran Forum* 13 (1979) 10.

²See Eberhard Kennetner, “Kindercommunion,” *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, ed. Gerhard Krause and Gerhard Müller (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1977-) 18:188-91.

³Arthur Carl Piepkorn, *The Church: Selected Writings of Arthur Carl Piepkorn*, ed. Michael Plekon and William Wiecher (Delhi, N.Y.: American Lutheran Publicity Bureau, 1993) 51-52.

Advocates of infant communion believe the tradition favors the resumption of the practice. The fact that the east continues to commune infants and the evidence that infants were communed in parts of the west for over a thousand years is telling. They believe this record indicates that infant communion is not simply an idiosyncratic practice but rather a central feature of the church's worship that has been jettisoned by a sacramental theology and piety to which western churches no longer subscribe. If the church is to prevail against the many forces threatening to divide it, the faithful must anchor themselves in the ancient liturgy that sustained them during times of persecution, tyranny, and apostasy.

3. *The baptism-communion connection*

Proponents of infant communion also point to what they believe are inconsistencies in the church's sacramental practice. Lutheranism has always insisted on the priority of grace and has seen the doctrine of justification as the source from which its theological proposals must evolve. The baptism of infants has been highly prized in part by Lutherans because it highlights a God who graciously adopts a helpless humanity into his family. Given this stress on God's unconditional love and favor, defenders of infant communion wonder why babies and young children are not fully included in the Lord's supper. How can a church that shouts so loudly about a God who loves without preconditions possibly erect age barriers at one of the places this gracious God has promised to be, namely the holy supper?⁴

Some pastors have noted an acute crisis of conscience when faced with a situation where a young child at the altar has asked to receive communion. Equipped with an understanding of the Lord's supper as a meal that is sheer grace, these clergy wonder what authority they have to refuse the sacrament to someone who asks for it. If the supper is truly Jesus' last *testament*, bestowed freely without regard for merit to his children, how can the pastor presume to intervene between the testator and his heirs?

4. *Inclusivity*

Finally, those wishing to commune infants emphasize the nature of the Lord's supper as an eschatological meal. As the *Lutheran Book of Worship* puts it, this is a "foretaste of the feast to come." The image of heaven as a great banquet has been prominent in the Christian tradition (Matt 22:1-10; Rev 19:9). If the Lord's supper prefigures the community that will eventually be gathered around the throne of God, shouldn't it be inclusive of all members, including infants? This argument is often extended to say that for too long we have made questions of personal piety primary (i.e., the worthiness of the recipient) while neglecting the corporate character of the meal.⁵

⁴See Stephen Goodwin and Lewis Groce, "Owning Our Sacramental Theology," *Lutheran Partners* (November/December, 1993) 18-20.

⁵H. Frederick Reisz, Jr., "Infant Communion: A Matter of Christian Unity," *Word & World* 8 (1988) 63, 65.

The collective power of these reasons should not be underestimated. Supporters of infant communion clearly take the tradition of the church seriously, though as we shall see, their reading is selective. Moreover, the evidence they cite for their case is undergirded by a theology that is strongly grace-oriented and rooted in an understanding of the sacraments that affirms the power and presence of Christ in the elements. I would now like to respond to this argument and offer a proposal of my own.

II. ARGUMENTS AGAINST

1. *Discerning the body*

Any discussion of infant communion has to wrestle with the key text in 1 Cor 11:29 and the interpretation of what is meant by “discerning the body.” Those who favor infant communion appear to be overly sanguine that Paul is talking only about the assembly of believers and not the presence of Christ in the bread. While space prevents full discussion, convincing arguments have been made for the latter position. Prominent sixteenth-century Lutherans understood the text in this way.⁶ Perhaps some hermeneutical modesty is necessary today, given the ambiguities in the text. Perhaps the text’s ambiguity is intentional and preserves a multilayered understanding of the supper, thus honoring the fundamental mystery at the heart of holy communion. Besides, even if one understands the mandate to discern the body exclusively in a communitarian or “ecclesial” way, it is difficult to see how this aids the side of those favoring infant communion. “Discernment” is a cognitive act. In what sense might an infant be able to perceive or appreciate the communal dimension of the supper? Are not those holding to this interpretation still stuck with the fact that an infant is being asked to “do” something beyond his or her capacity?

2. *Historical precedents*

Paradoxically, with regard to the early church, advocates of infant communion have a completely different attitude toward church tradition when compared with the exegetical tradition of 1 Cor 11:29. In this case, the tradition threatens to become normative. Frazzled by the dizzying array of contemporary Christian practice and teaching, they look longingly to a period (usually the first three centuries) when some sort of “primitive” unity existed in the church. The idea is to recapture that past and thus retain some semblance of order and sanity in the church today.

The problem is that much of the early church’s history is obscured by shadows. There were voices casting doubt on infant communion (Justin, Origen, and Cyril of Jerusalem) that are not often cited by supporters of the practice.⁷ These

⁶See Ernie V. Lassman, “1 Corinthians 11:29—‘Discerning the Body’—and its Implications for Closed Communion,” *Logia* 2 (1993) 15-18.

⁷Anderson and Gritsch, “Communing Infants,” 8.

witnesses make arguments for a “primitive unity” appear specious and illustrate the danger of making claims that infant communion was “apostolic practice.”⁸

Because of the paucity of evidence, those studying the first three centuries need to be especially careful not to be overly extravagant in their assertions. The temptation facing all historians—to read the present (or a desired present) into the past—is especially acute when working in this period.⁹ A quote from the Episcopal bishop of North Carolina, C. FitzSimons Allison, speaking on the subject of infant communion, is appropriate here:

It is ironic that we are being told that the experience of the medieval church in the West, together with the agreement among the Protestant, Anglican and Roman Catholic reformers of the sixteenth century, 400 years of Anglican experience, and the present teaching of the Roman Catholic church, must all be jettisoned in favor of a practice in the third century possibly implied by Tertullian and Hippolytus, one a heretic and the other a schismatic!¹⁰

When we turn to the churches of the reformation and the Lutheran church in particular there is once again a reluctance to rely on the tradition. Some claim that Luther, Melancthon, et al. did not commune infants because they simply passed on without question the tradition established in the medieval church. In other words, the force of tradition was such that the reformers let stand a practice which in reality merited closer examination. But this is a curious argument. Since when did the reformers *not* scrutinize the practices of the church, in particular the medieval church, to determine whether they were consistent with the gospel? Communion in one kind was found wanting and so it was discarded. The same thing happened with clerical celibacy. Might it not have been the case that Luther found the practice of giving communion only to more mature believers to be perfectly consistent with the gospel and therefore continued the practice? The fact that Luther did not reflect on this topic is not a case of being overwhelmed by the tradition. Rather he simply continued a practice that did not conflict with the doctrine of justification that was at the heart of his theology.

3. *The baptism-communion connection*

This then brings us to the strongest argument of those who advocate infant communion. This is the view that a church which baptizes infants is logically committed to communing them. How can those fully included in the body of Christ in baptism be refused nourishment at the Lord’s table? A God who justifies the ungodly needs no prerequisites to do his work. To exclude infants from holy communion makes it appear that we need to qualify in terms of age or intellectual ability before we can partake in the Lord’s supper.

First of all, let us agree that baptism is all-sufficient. The God who washes us at the font removes every spot and stain and fully includes us in the heavenly

⁸Goodwin and Groce, “Sacramental Theology,” 19.

⁹See Susanne Heine, *Women and Early Christianity: A Reappraisal* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988).

¹⁰C. FitzSimons Allison, “Anglican Initiatory Rites: A Contribution to the Current Debate,” *Anglican and Episcopal History* 56 (1987) 32.

kingdom. As Luther says in his *Large Catechism*, the purpose of baptism is to save. This baptism continues throughout the life of the believer. As Christians live out their vocations they are continually “put to death” (i.e., baptized) until the day they are reunited with their Lord and their baptism becomes complete.

Given this understanding of baptism, we might ponder: Why did God institute another sacrament, namely the Lord’s supper? If baptism is all that a Christian truly needs, why are we commanded to eat and drink the body and blood of Christ? Why would Jesus require his followers to partake in a meal in addition to their washing?

The words of institution and Luther’s *Large Catechism* are helpful in providing an answer. The fact that the Lord’s Supper was also a *last* supper is freighted with meaning. Our celebration of holy communion begins with an ominous note: “On the night in which he was betrayed...” We are reminded immediately that the context of this meal was a horrible act of disloyalty on the part of one of Jesus’ closest followers. Soon the rest of the disciples would follow the way of Judas (Mark 14:50). The very words of institution echo themes of rebellion and treason: “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin.” The mention of blood and the need for forgiveness hint that a horrendous crime is in the offing and those present are among the guilty. It is proper to emphasize the community aspect of the Lord’s supper, but let us be clear that it is a community in need of forgiveness. Explicitly or implicitly, the first to eat the Lord’s supper were guilty of murder.

A careful reading of Luther’s explanation of the Lord’s supper in the *Large Catechism* also establishes that forgiveness is at the heart of this meal: “In other words, we go to the sacrament because we receive there a great treasure, through and in which we obtain the forgiveness of sins.”¹¹ Luther presupposes that those at the table are in the midst of great temptation. They bring to the altar a wavering faith and a troubled conscience. Though born anew in their baptisms, the Old Adam or Old Eve clings closely and threatens their fragile relationship with God: “The Lord’s Supper is given as a daily food and sustenance so that our faith may refresh and strengthen itself and not weaken in the struggle but grow continually stronger.”¹² Without forgiveness it would not be possible to go on. But because Jesus gives himself completely in the bread and wine, it is possible to be refreshed and renewed. As Luther says in the *Small Catechism*’s explanation of the Lord’s supper: “Where there is forgiveness of sins, there are also life and salvation.”¹³

What is the connection between this emphasis on forgiveness in the Lord’s supper and the infant communion debate? If we can establish that forgiveness is central to the understanding of holy communion, then we might have an answer to

¹¹Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism*, in *Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) 449.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism*, in *Book of Concord*, 352.

our earlier question as to why God would institute another sacrament beside baptism and for whom this sacrament is intended.

As the words of institution and Luther's *Large Catechism* indicate, the Lord's supper is for those whose faith is fragile, who tread in the shadows of doubt and who are troubled by their failure to love God and neighbor. If that is the case, why would we want to include infants in the supper? Luther believed that infants were perfectly capable of having faith—in fact he believed that infant faith was the purest of all.¹⁴ God's creative and powerful word, spoken to infants in their baptism, brings them into a relationship of trust with the Almighty, frail though they be in mind and body. Hence a case can be made that infants should not partake in holy communion because they simply don't need it! This is a meal of forgiveness. Infants, whose faith is yet untainted by the world, are not in danger of falling away from Christ. Where we adults fall into idolatry, they simply trust. Recall that Jesus pointed to the little ones as models of faith: "Unless you turn and become as little children you will not enter the kingdom of God" (Matt 18:3).

4. Inclusivity

This leads to a delicious reversal in our normal ways of thinking about who is included and who is not. It is the little ones in our midst who have never left the Lord. However, we adults have excluded ourselves from the community of faith by our fall into idolatry and our willingness to trust things in the created order rather than our creator. Holy communion is best seen as the occasion when older children and adults are reunited with infants and young children in the company of believers. As we receive our Lord's body and blood with his promise of forgiveness we have our child-like trust restored.

Note that the position being advocated here is not that infants are without sin. Like all of humankind, they are born with original sin. However, in baptism this sin is forgiven and the infant is transferred into the kingdom of Christ. Holy communion is for those whose consciences are stricken by the effects of post-baptismal sin. It is a meal of forgiveness for those who have willfully broken their relationship with Christ.

It seems clear that infants do not need to be included in this meal. *Who* should be included is a matter for church discussion and pastoral discretion. The present practice in many churches of waiting until fifth grade is reasonable. Most ten-year-olds are quite able to feel sorrow for sin and ask for forgiveness. There may be cases when the age could be quite lower. It is not inconceivable that a six-year-old who possessed a sensitive conscience and who was instructed in the meaning of repentance and forgiveness could be included in the Lord's supper. Individual cases call for pastoral and parental discretion.

¹⁴In a church postil of 1525 Luther says: "What sort of reason did the children possess whom Christ held and blessed? Did they not lack reason? Why did he call them to himself and bless them? How did they come to have such faith that they were made children of heaven? Indeed, it was because they were without reason and foolish that they were better able to have faith than the old and reasoning people." WA 17/2:85 (my translation). See also Lorenz Grönvik, *Die Taufe in der Theologie Martin Luthers* (Åbo: Åbo Akademi, 1968) 167.

Finally, not only is the communion of infants unnecessary, it also tends to undermine baptism. The restoration of a “unified” initiation rite which would involve confirming and communing infants at the same time they are baptized would raise questions about baptism’s efficacy. People will be led to wonder: Isn’t baptism enough? Why is communion needed to complete it? The sacrament of baptism, understood by Luther to be the “most precious jewel that could adorn body or soul,” would be marginalized if infant communion became accepted church practice.

In summation, the renewed interest in infant communion is a direct corollary of the modern emphasis on the communal nature of the Lord’s supper. When the primary stress falls upon holy communion as a meal of fellowship it becomes difficult to make the case that infants should be prohibited from participating. If the Lord’s supper is chiefly a celebration of our unity in Christ, then it becomes hard to exclude babies.

However, the churches of the reformation and Martin Luther in particular saw the community gathered at the table as one in special need of forgiveness. While the recovery of the corporate dimension of communion is to be applauded, it must not be overlooked that those assembled at the altar are sinners whose consciences need comfort and healing. The Lord’s supper is for them. As for the infants and young children who come forward, it will do to remind them of their baptism and full membership in the body of Christ.