

Early Communion Considerations

By Jacob O'Flanagan

When the question of early communion was initially brought up I consulted different Lutheran theological resources, mostly dealing with the broader question of who should be admitted to the Table, to glean principles that can be applied to our question of early communion. Two major points rang through as particularly relevant. First, that the Supper is established for Christians to receive. And second, that those Christians who receive the Supper ought to examine themselves.

In a passage that quite closely pertains to the question we are considering, Gerhard writes the following in his “A Comprehensive Explanation of Holy Baptism and the Lord’s Supper”:

Since the apostle Paul expressly requires in 1 Cor. 11:28, 29 that a person first examine himself and then eat of the consecrated bread and drink of the consecrated chalice, so that he does not become guilty of the body and blood of the Lord through an unworthy reception, it thus indisputably follows that not only Christians (that is, those who confess the Christian faith and are in the fellowship of the Church) are to be admitted to the holy Supper, but specifically only those who examine themselves, that is those who judge themselves (1 Cor. 11:31), discern the Lord’s body (v. 29), and proclaim His death (v. 26). Therefore, the following are herewith excluded:

...

9. The minor children, who have not yet arrived at the age of understanding, for they cannot examine themselves and discern the body of Christ.

From the first of the two major relevant points, that the Supper is for Christians, it seems the following expectations are appropriate:

- They ought to be baptized.
- They ought to be leading a Christian life. Of course it is true that spiritual life, be it faith or unbelief, will manifest itself differently at different ages and in different people. But we would look for such a child to be leading a life of faith appropriate for their age and development. The same expectations we would have for adults approaching the Table to not be living in open unrepentant sin would also apply for children.
 - In regards to this it should be remembered that the sins of children, though they are often by nature childish compared to our adult sins, are still real sins both in the eyes of God and in the eyes of other children. Care should therefor be taken that neither the early communing child nor the other children are given a poor view of communion by our negligence on this point.
 - Thus it may well occur that a child who was previously allowed to commune early may enter a period when it is deemed appropriate to again withhold communion whether it be as a result of unresolved sins against their siblings or friends, or as a result of fluctuating maturity, or some other legitimate issue. In these things working closely with the child’s parents will be highly important.
- They ought to have a sufficient understanding of the gospel, that we are not saved by being good enough etc.

From the second of the two points, the necessity of examination, it seems these additional expectations should also be included:

- They should be mature enough to perform the necessary self examination.
- As they are examining themselves for partaking of the Lord's Supper, they should have a basic understanding of what it is.
 - As Jesus is being received, this would include a basic understanding of his person and work, namely:
 - That he is truly God and truly man.
 - That he is not the Father nor the Holy Spirit.
 - That he was without sin.
 - That he died for our sins.
 - That he truly rose from the dead.
 - They ought to understand that we are receiving the body and blood of Jesus, not just symbols.
- The requirement of examination brings up the final and perhaps most significant question in allowing a child early communion. That is the question of why they want to receive communion early.
 - If it boils down to essentially wanting to more fully participate as members in the life of the congregation, to be treated as having a certain maturity in the faith, I would recommend waiting until the completion of confirmation as that is part of its function and purpose.
 - Though in such a situation a compromise of sorts may be agreed to, if deemed appropriate by the Pastor and parents, whereby confirmation is begun earlier than normal.
 - But if the child desires communion to be comforted with the forgiveness of sins as promised and given at the Lord's Table, which is the proper examination and preparation, then I would recommend allowing such a child to the Table provided they also meet the other qualifications mentioned above.