

On the Admission of Children to the Lord's Table

Are there any POSITIVE reasons for the admission of children to Communion?

There are strong theological reasons why it is important to scrutinise the present practice of our Church whereby baptised children are excluded from participating in the Lord's Supper. Is it not the case that our present practice is obscuring the meaning of the Gospel, as well as hampering the mission of the Church? Reasons for admitting them must not be merely pragmatic or sentimental, but flow from a positive understanding of the nature of the Gospel of grace and the Church as the Body of Christ. The end of godly discipline must be to make the Gospel visible and build up the Church, not to hinder growth in grace.

(1) Baptised children belong to Christ and hence to the Christian Family. They are Christ's by right of Creation and Redemption, and more particularly in virtue of their baptism - the sign and seal of the Covenant made for them in Christ.

The concept of belonging to Christ is most important and one which is obscured, if not lost, by our present practice. Our "belonging" to Christ is not conditional on our ⁽¹⁾believing and repenting. It is the other way round. We believe that we belong. Faith is our response to the Gospel, our acknowledgment that we are not our own but are bought with a price - and bought long before we were born.

Our present practice has created the widespread impression that you only "belong" to the Church "if you join" - i.e. if you fulfil certain conditions, go to a communicants class, etc. - and even then so many feel that they do not really belong, but drop away because they do not feel they can keep fulfilling the conditions. In other words, they think of the Church as a religious club, which they may or may not opt to join.

Conversely our children ought to be made to feel from the very outset that they belong to Christ and the Christian family, and that the Table of the Lord is for them as well as for their parents - that Christ gives Himself in love to them as well as to adults. In such a context of love and acceptance faith grows and is nourished - the faith that we belong to Christ and to one another. Unbelief is then the act of rejecting that they already belong, of sinning against their baptism - "denying the Lord who bought them".

Are not our Roman Catholic brethren better in their practice than we are in creating this sense of belonging, and consequently evoking a stronger sense of loyalty to the Church?

Clearly theological issues are at stake here, e.g. our belief in the Headship of Christ over all, our understanding of baptism and the work of the Holy Spirit in sealing what Christ has done for us and our children, the nature of faith and our doctrine of the Church as the Body of Christ - fundamentally the doctrine of grace.

(2) Grace is Unconditioned and Unconditional, Free and yet Costly.

(a) God's Covenant Love (held out in Baptism and the Lord's Supper) is unconditioned by any considerations of worth or merit or good works - unconditioned even by faith and repentance. This was the Reformation insight in the interpretation of sola gratia and the reinterpretation of the sacraments.

So Calvin drew a very important distinction between evangelical repentance and legal repentance - important both for pastoral counselling and the mission of

* (1) "Our believing is conditioned at its source by our belonging".

Michael Polanyi, Personal Knowledge p. 322.

the Church. Legal repentance is the view which says, "Repent! and if you repent you will be forgiven". It makes grace and acceptance and forgiveness conditional upon our repentance. This, Calvin maintained, was the basic fallacy in the mediaeval sacrament of penance. In evangelical repentance on the other hand, forgiveness is logically prior to repentance. God has already spoken to us and our children the Word of Grace, the Word of the Cross, the Word of forgiveness, and it is this Word so freely spoken which summons us and our children unconditionally to faith and repentance. On this New Testament and Reformed understanding, faith and repentance are not conditions of grace, but our response to grace. This is clearly of the utmost importance for our understanding of Baptism and the Lord's Supper as signs and seals of the Covenant of Grace.

(b) On the other hand God's grace summons us unconditionally to faith and repentance, bringing with it powerful categorical imperatives. The fact that Christ died to take away our sins and restore us to communion with God, means that we are summoned unconditionally to renounce those sins for which Christ died, and to seek that communion for which we were reconciled. If someone takes bread and wine at the Lord's Table, saying, "I believe Christ died for my sins - but I am not going to give them up!" - it would be blasphemy. That would be eating and drinking unworthily.

In all our concern for "godly discipline" in the administering of the sacraments, a proper balance must be kept between these two aspects of grace. The one danger would be to stress the freeness of grace at the expense of its costly claims, and hence to turn it into "cheap grace". That would lead to indiscriminate baptism and an irresponsible giving of the Lord's Supper to any and all, irrespective of faith and repentance. That is the danger of "antinomianism". The other danger would be so to stress the costly claims of grace that we impose "conditions" for grace, and hence destroy the meaning of grace. This is the danger of legalism - and of certain over zealous forms of "fencing the table" by a misuse of I Cor. ch 11 in our Calvinistic history. So our Highland tradition can in practice turn the sacrament of the Lord's Supper into something like the sacrament of penance, by demanding "evidences" of grace as a condition for acceptance at the Table.

This is of importance for the question of admitting children to communion. The Covenant of Grace is for them - and held out to all freely and unconditionally. So who can forbid them? Yet at the same time it summons them with their parents unconditionally to faith and repentance.

(3) Baptism and the Lord's Supper. These considerations about grace are important when we ask the question about the relation between Baptism and the Lord's Supper, both of which are "signs and seals of grace" - when we ask, Is Baptism a necessary condition for admission to the Lord's Supper?

God's grace is not conditional upon our baptism and participation in communion, but nevertheless summons us unconditionally to be baptised and to communicate, that we might participate by grace in Christ and His benefits. To refuse to be baptised or to communicate is tantamount to unbelief and disobedience - to denying the Lord who bought us. The sacraments are "means of grace", not conditions of grace.

(a) The proper order is for baptism to precede communion. Baptism is the sign that we belong to Christ, and were purchased by Him long before we were even born or aware of it. Christ baptises us into His Body that He might nourish us by faith. Hence a child may be baptised before he or she comes to faith and awareness of grace, but the child is called to receive in faith that grace into which he or she has been baptised. A child can respond to the call and by faith feed upon Christ (John 6). The faith may be as a grain of mustard seed, and understanding minimal, but where a child can hear and understand

something of the meaning of the words, "Take, eat ..." who can forbid him? This is not indiscriminate celebration. It is not separating the sacraments from faith. It is recognising the nature of grace and childlike faith, without which none can enter the Kingdom.

(b) Hence we cannot argue for the indiscriminate admission of children to communion. But we recognise that there are children, e.g. of Christian parents, with dawning faith, who have heard the call, who want to respond and receive Christ with His blessings and be identified with the Christian family, and an over-zealous concern for "godly discipline" must not hinder them. This may well mean that they receive communion before they are confirmed. But that does not mean that they must not press on to proper instruction and confirmation.

(c) It may on certain occasions mean that an unbaptised child (or adult) may seek to receive Christ in communion. Again we must not withhold bread and wine from such a child (or adult) but go on to show him or her that the Christ whom we receive in bread and wine calls us unconditionally to baptism. But any such reversal of the order of baptism and the Lord's Supper could never become the norm, though may occasionally be inevitable in the mission of the Church.

(4) The Lord's Supper is a converting Ordinance, not a badge of our conversion. In the early days after the Reformation in Scotland, the Lord's Supper was called (by John Davidson of Prestonpans and others) a "converting ordinance". At a communion season, Christ and the Gospel were held out to the congregation by Word, in preaching, and after the sermon, over bread and wine, the minister said, "Take, eat, this is the Body of Christ broken for you". In receiving bread and wine, the people "received Christ" in an act of "evangelical repentance". It was a powerful evangelistic occasion. But this doctrine was attacked by the federal Calvinists of the 17th century (e.g. by Geo. Gillespie and others) who said that the sacrament was not a converting ordinance but a "badge of our conversion"! The logic behind this was the doctrine of a double decree and of a limited atonement. You cannot say to all indiscriminately, "This is the Body of Christ broken for you!" Christ died only for the elect. Therefore the sacrament of communion is only for the elect, and the "evidence" of election is repentance, conversion. So people were taught to "examine themselves" for "evidences" of grace, and such evidences were in effect conditions required for worthy communicating. But this was in practice a reversion to what Calvin called "legal repentance" - and lay behind later practices of "fencing the table". But it altered the meaning of the sacrament from being a sign and seal of grace to becoming a sign and seal of our repentance, our conversion, our worthiness.

It seems to me we need to recover the meaning of the sacraments as "converting ordinances". Clearly this is of importance in the question of admitting children to the Lord's Table. If the Lord's Supper is a "converting ordinance", who can forbid a child receiving Christ in faith? If, on the other hand, it is a "badge of our conversion" we shall look for "evidences of conversion" before we permit them to come. But that is the way of "conditional grace" and "legal repentance".

(5) Godly Discipline must be both Evangelical and Judicial, but in that order. There is always the danger of subordinating the evangelical to the judicial, as in the tradition of Tertullian and the Mediaeval Church. Clearly there must be proper ordering of the sacraments, but order must serve the Gospel and not vice versa. Our refusal to permit children to come to communion may indicate that our zeal for good order and proper discipline may obscure the meaning of grace, rather than make it visible.

(6) There is a danger of our present practice of confirmation driving a wedge between Baptism and the Lord's Supper. There is an inner bond and unity between the two sacraments. The Christ who was baptised for us in blood on the Cross and who baptises us into Himself by the Spirit, gives Himself freely and unconditionally to the baptised to participate in His communion with the Father and in all His blessings. Hence baptism is into Christ, into a life of communion - a life of faith in response to grace.

But our present practice of saying in effect, "Yes, you have been baptised by the Church, but you can only receive Christ at the Lord's Table IF you go to Sunday School, IF you attend Bible Class, IF you "join the Church" and are confirmed, can drive a wedge between the two sacraments. It can belittle baptism by implying that you do not yet belong to Christ although you have been baptised, and it can obscure the meaning of the Lord's Supper as a sacrament of the Gospel by making the offered grace conditional. When Jews give a drop of wine from the cup to infants when they are circumcised, and the Orthodox give a sip of wine to the child at baptism, they are acknowledging that the child is welcomed into covenant fellowship. So our practice should make clear that a baptised child is part of the Christian family and welcome to participate in all the benefits of the Covenant of Grace. But does that not mean sitting in faith with the rest of the family at the Table of the Lord?

(7) The Gospel and our Mode of Reception. As God has given Himself to be known and loved in a reconciling act by the Word made flesh - not by Word only, but by the Word incarnate in our flesh and blood - so we respond not simply by hearing and understanding the Word (in preaching and Christian education) but by "eating Christ's flesh and drinking Christ's blood" in a total response of being reconciled in body, mind and spirit. The nature of the Gospel prescribes the nature of true Christian communication and consequently the appropriate mode of response. So Christ's Baptism in the waters of Jordan and in Blood on the Cross summons us to be baptised and identified with Him; and His giving of His life for us to be the Bread of Life summons us to feed on Him at the Table in loving communion. But is this total response to the total Self-giving of Christ not required of children as well as of adults? May they not eat His Body and drink His blood by faith? Or do we merely spiritualise this language for children?

It would be wrong to try to justify the admission of children to communion on purely pragmatic or educational grounds, by, for example, marching a whole Sunday School class into a communion service. But for some of the theological reasons given above about the nature of the Gospel and Christian communication are there not powerful grounds for recognising that Christ calls children to come to Him by faith that they may feed upon the Bread of Life as members of His family.

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