

United, Separated, Re-united

The Story of Baptism and the Lord's Supper

The history of children at the Lord's Supper is essentially the story of the relationship between the sacraments. In the early church, all baptized persons were welcome at communion. This practice was gradually abandoned in the Middle Ages, so that by the Reformation the Western church had separated the Lord's Supper from baptism and attached it to confirmation or profession of faith. Today, Protestant denominations have begun to re-unite baptism and the Lord's Supper.

The story begins in the early church, when the sacraments were intimately connected. Ancient liturgies show that both baptism and communion were part of the ceremonies that marked a person's entrance into the church. These ceremonies included baptism, a laying on of hands (later referred to as confirmation), and immediate participation in communion. From the day of one's baptism, the Lord's Supper was part of a person's entrance into the church that was repeated throughout his or her life.

Clear references to very young children participating in communion go back as far as the earliest arguments for infant baptism. The church father Cyprian (d. 258 A.D.) cited John 3:5 ("Unless a man be born again of water and the Spirit ...") and John 6:53 ("Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man ..."), arguing that baptism and the Lord's Supper were necessary for membership in the Christian community. For both sacraments, age was not important. The two sacraments were inseparable. To abandon the Lord's Supper would be to abandon the community of Christ and therefore Christ himself.

Augustine also administered communion to infants immediately after their baptism. Infants participated by some

accommodating means such as receiving in their mouths the priest's little finger dipped in the wine. In his Easter sermons to the newly baptized, Augustine would cite 1 Corinthians 12:27 ("You are the body of Christ and individually members of it") and 10:17 ("We who are many are one body, for we all partake of one bread"). Then he would point to the bread of the Lord's Supper and tell the newly baptized that they who were now part of the body of Christ would receive the body of Christ in communion; Christ's church body and sacramental body were united in the Supper. For Augustine, infants and the mentally impaired were the ideal subjects for the sacraments, for they imaged the helplessness of the human condition.

A number of references in Augustine's writings imply that participation in communion for all baptized members was the

by David
Rylaarsdam
Professor of
Historical Theology



universal practice of the church and assumed to be ancient. The Eastern church has always allowed baptized infants to commune. However, there were several developments in the medieval West which contributed to a gradual split between baptism, laying on of hands (confirmation), and the Lord's Supper.

First, in an effort to preserve the power of bishops, the Western church insisted on the principle "No bishop, no confirmation." As Christianity spread, a bishop was not available in many regions to confirm a baptized infant. In outlying villages it might be several years after a baptism before confirmation by a bishop was possible. A delay in confirmation often resulted in a delay in a child's first communion. In contrast to the West, the Eastern church insisted on retaining the unity of the ceremonies which marked a person's entrance into the church. Presbyters in the East were allowed to confirm a baptism immediately if a bishop was not available. Therefore, a newly baptized person would participate in communion.

Second, in the thirteenth century the Western church formulated the doctrine of transubstantiation. This doctrine claimed that the substance of bread and wine changes into the actual body and blood of Jesus during communion. The alarming question arose: What might happen if a child dropped the actual body of Christ on the floor or slobbered into the chalice of Christ's actual blood? Fear that a child might profane the consecrated elements led to a reluctance to give communion to young children.

Third, in the later Middle Ages the communion cup was withheld from the laity. Adults were left with the bread

Ancient liturgies show that both baptism and communion were part of the ceremonies which marked a person's entrance into the church.

**United, Separated,
Re-united**

▶ and infants with nothing, since the general practice for centuries was to commune infants with wine alone since they would choke on the bread. In the fifteenth century, the followers of the martyr John Hus tried to restore the cup to the laity, in part, for the sake of young children.

Fourth, the dominant Lord's Supper piety in the later Middle Ages was heavily penitential. It was necessary for a person to make confession and do penance in order to receive communion. Since very young children did not have the ability to confess or do penance as older children or adults did, they were not as worthy to participate in communion.

Finally, confirmation was a practice looking for a theology. Originally a laying on of hands, confirmation gradually became separated from baptism. This independent practice begged explanation. The best that scholars in the Middle Ages could muster was to say that confirmation was a sacrament which augmented the grace of baptism so that a person could bear witness to the faith. Since infants did not need to bear witness to their faith, it was reasoned that they did not need this sacrament until they were older and ready to confirm their place in the church. Many parents, it seems, did not think very highly of this theology. During the later Middle Ages they increasingly disrespected confirmation and did not bother having their children confirmed. Councils responded with threats of severe punishments: negligent parents would be barred from the church and their children would not be allowed to the Supper until confirmation took place.

By the time of the Reformation, Roman Catholics had established in most places a new threshold for first communion: an "age of discretion," not baptism, was necessary for participation. John Calvin did not question that assumption. While he rejected confirmation as a sacrament (he found the term itself problematic because "to confirm" baptism did an injustice to baptism), Calvin salvaged the essential confirmation practice of having an individual give a public account of his or her faith prior to first communion.

For biblical support, Calvin turned to Paul's command to "examine oneself" by

*The story of baptism
and the Lord's Supper
is essentially this:
what the early church
joined together, the
later medieval church
gradually put asunder.
Today, Protestants
are returning to the
practice of the early
church.*

"discerning the body" (1 Cor. 11:28-29), a text which was not used in the early church or Middle Ages to keep young children from communion. In his commentary, Calvin downplays the problems with the Supper at Corinth. Without pointing to textual evidence, Calvin claims that Paul is not even speaking specifically about division at the Supper in verses 17-19. When Paul, in verses 20-22, talks about Corinthians at the Supper who are drunk while others go hungry, Calvin claims that the apostle is "exaggerating" but does not provide historical or textual support for this conclusion. Regarding verses 23-29, Calvin is "of the opinion" that Paul is not addressing the situation at Corinth specifically but is speaking "of every kind of faulty administration or reception of the Supper" (*Comm. on 1 Cor.*, p. 385). Calvin concludes that "we offer poison . . . to our tender children" at the Supper, for it is vain to expect them "to distinguish rightly the holiness of Christ's body" (*Institutes* 4.16.30). This conclusion is based on an interpretation that pays less attention to the historical and literary contexts of 1 Corinthians 11 than his favorite ancient interpreter John Chrysostom did

or than modern Reformed interpreters do (see Weima's article on page 7).

Calvin's other argument for an "age of discretion" is based on an assumption about the Passover. He claims: "The Passover, the place of which has been taken by the Supper, did not admit all guests indiscriminately, but was duly eaten only by those who were old enough to be able to inquire into its meaning" (4.16.30). No biblical or historical text clearly supports Calvin's claim.

As Calvin makes clear at the end of his very brief arguments for an age of discretion, he simply takes for granted that this practice is so logical that it should not be given a second thought (4.16.30). His assumption is not completely surprising. One generation of the church often inherits practices of the previous generation without being fully aware of their roots. Calvin would likely have been troubled to know that the late medieval legacy of separating baptism and the Lord's Supper was caused by the principle of conserving the power of bishops, by the doctrine of transubstantiation, by the ability to do penance, by withholding the cup from the laity, and by the punishment of parents who disrespected the sacrament of confirmation.

The story of baptism and the Lord's Supper is essentially this: what the early church joined together, the later medieval church gradually put asunder. Today, Protestants are returning to the practice of the early church. For biblical and theological reasons, the Reformed Church in America, Christian Reformed Churches of Australia, Presbyterian Church (USA), Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Anglican Communion, and others have reunited the sacraments. One body in baptism sharing one bread. The CRC also, after more than two decades of reflection, has decided to welcome all baptized persons to the Supper. Synod's 2006 decision returns us to Augustine's sentiment, summarized well by Max Johnson: The Christian life, from entrance into the covenant community onward, is rooted in the graciousness of God, the God who through the Word and sacraments "always acts first, always acts in love prior to our action, leading us by the Holy Spirit to the response of faith, hope, and love within the community of grace" (*Rites of Christian Initiation*, p. 376).