

Infant Communion in the Lutheran Church?

As “servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God” who know that someday they “will have to give an account” for the souls that have been under their care,¹ Confessional Lutheran pastors take very seriously their vocational duty to preside responsibly at the celebrations of the Lord’s Supper that take place in their congregations, and to exercise a proper spiritual oversight with respect to those whom they admit to this sacrament. According to the Lutheran Confessions, a Lutheran pastor’s offering of Christ’s body and blood to a communicant is to be preceded by examination and absolution. The Apology of the Augsburg Confession describes this kind of pastoral care: “Among us the Mass is celebrated every Lord’s day and on other festivals, when the sacrament is made available to those who wish to partake of it, *after they have been examined and absolved.*”² And we read in the Augsburg Confession that

The people have grown accustomed to receiving the sacrament together – all who are fit to do so. This also increases reverence and respect for public ceremonies. For people are admitted only if they first had an opportunity to be examined and heard.³

The examination of which the Confessions here speak is directly related to the catechetical instruction that also necessarily precedes admission to the altar. Lutherans accordingly also declare in the Apology:

Many among us use the Lord’s Supper every Lord’s day after they are instructed, examined, and absolved. ... Among our opponents there is no catechesis of children whatever, even though the canons prescribe it. Among us, pastors and ministers of the

¹1 Corinthians 4:1; Hebrews 13:17; from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*, copyright 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

²Apology of the Augsburg Confession XXIV:1, in *The Book of Concord*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), p. 258. Emphasis added.

³Augsburg Confession XXIV:5-6 (Latin), Kolb/Wengert p. 69.

Regarding the character and frequency of this pre-communion examination, Martin Luther writes that the “bishop” or pastor should “be informed of those who want to commune. They should request in person to receive the Lord’s Supper so that he may be able to know both their names and manner of life. And let him not admit the applicants unless they can give a reason for their faith and can answer questions about what the Lord’s Supper is, what its benefits are, and what they expect to derive from it. In other words, they should be able to repeat the Words of Institution from memory and to explain that they are coming because they are troubled by the consciousness of their sin, the fear of death, or some other evil, such as temptation of the flesh, the world, or the devil, and now hunger and thirst to receive the word and sign of grace and salvation from the Lord himself through the ministry of the bishop, so that they may be consoled and comforted; this was Christ’s purpose, when he in priceless love gave and instituted this Supper, and said, ‘Take and eat,’ etc. But I think it enough for the applicants for communion to be examined or explored once a year. Indeed, a man may be so understanding that he needs to be questioned only once in his lifetime or not at all. For, by this practice, we want to guard lest the worthy and unworthy alike rush to the Lord’s Supper, as we have hitherto seen done in the Roman church. There they seek only to communicate; but the faith, the comfort, the use and benefit of the Supper are not even mentioned or considered” (“An Order of Mass and Communion for the Church at Wittenberg,” *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 53 [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965], pp. 32-33).

churches are required to instruct and examine the youth publicly, a custom that produces very good results.⁴

In his (shorter) Preface to the Large Catechism, Martin Luther says that his effort in preparing the catechism “has been designed and undertaken for the instruction of children and the uneducated.”⁵ He adds that

It contains what every Christian should know. Anyone who does not know it should not be numbered among Christians nor admitted to any sacrament, just as artisans who do not know the rules and practices of their craft are rejected and considered incompetent. ... I well remember the time when we found ignorant, old, elderly people who knew nothing of these things – in fact, even now we find them daily – yet they still go to baptism and the sacrament [of the Altar] and exercise all the rights of Christians, although *those who come to the sacrament certainly should know more and have a deeper understanding of all Christian teaching than children and beginners in school.*⁶

In the Preface to his Small Catechism, and in his typical hyperbolic style, Luther gives these directions to pastors regarding the instruction they should provide for their parishioners:

To begin with, teach them these parts: the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, etc., following the text word for word, so that they can also repeat it back to you and learn it by heart. Those who do not want to learn these things – who must be told how they deny Christ and are not Christians – should also not be admitted to the sacrament, should not be sponsors for children at baptism, and should not exercise any aspect of Christian freedom, but instead should simply be sent back home to the pope and his officials and, along with them, to the devil himself. Moreover, their parents and employers ought to deny them food and drink and advise them that the prince is disposed to drive such course people out of the country.⁷

Luther makes the same point, with gentler language, in the Large Catechism, where the Sacrament of the Altar is treated catechetically under three headings,

stating what it is, what its benefits are, and who is to receive it. All this is established from the words Christ used to institute it. So everyone who wishes to be a Christian and go to the sacrament should know them. For we do not intend to admit to the sacrament, and administer it to, those who do not know what they seek or why they come.⁸

It is not merely a general faith in Christ as Savior that constitutes a proper preparedness for receiving the Lord’s Supper. Rather, as the Small Catechism teaches, “a person who has faith *in these words*, ‘given for you’ and ‘shed for you for the forgiveness of sins,’ is really worthy and well prepared.”⁹

Martin Chemnitz touches on the “church fellowship” dimension of why prospective communicants are expected to be able to demonstrate that they know the faith of the church –

⁴Apology of the Augsburg Confession XV:40-41, Kolb/Wengert p. 229. Translation slightly revised.

⁵Large Catechism, Preface: 1, Kolb/Wengert p. 383.

⁶Large Catechism, Preface: 2,5, Kolb/Wengert p. 383. Emphasis added. To “go to baptism” in this context means to stand as a sponsor in a baptism.

⁷Small Catechism, Preface: 10-12, Kolb/Wengert pp. 348-49.

⁸Large Catechism V:1-2, Kolb/Wengert p. 467. Punctuation slightly revised.

⁹Small Catechism V:8, Kolb/Wengert p. 363. Emphasis added.

and collectively to confess that faith as their own – in his observation that “fellowship at the Lord’s table is a testimony of consensus, harmony, and unity in doctrine and faith, as Paul says: ‘We who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread’ (1 Cor. 10:17).”¹⁰

The Reformers do not think that the pastor’s duty to instruct the people from God’s Word, especially in regard to the Lord’s Supper, is limited to a one-time catechetical course. According to the Augsburg Confession,

The people are instructed more regularly and with the greatest diligence concerning the holy sacrament, to which purpose it was instituted, and how it is to be used, namely, as a comfort to terrified consciences. In this way, the people are drawn to Communion and to the Mass. At the same time, they are also instructed about other, false teaching concerning the sacrament.¹¹

The directives of the 1533 Brandenburg-Nürnberg Church Order concerning the examination of communicants are typical for the period. As epitomized by Edward T. Horn, this church order stipulates that

Those who intend to commune shall give notice to the pastor or one of the ministers the day before, or before Mass in the morning. The ministers shall ask of them in a discreet way whether they know the Ten Commandments, Creed and Lord’s Prayer, whether they know and hold the right doctrine concerning the Sacrament, what fruit they expect from a worthy use of it, and especially whether they hold enmity or wrath against any one. Thus may they discover how the people understand these matters, how much profit they derive from sermon and catechism, and how much they need kind instruction. But they must be careful not to mortify either young or old by their examination and thus for a long time keep them from the Sacrament. They shall diligently admonish the people to seek Absolution in preparation for the Sacrament. ... Those are to be excluded from the Communion who live in willful error and heresy, or in open undeniable vice, or scorn the express Word of God. Also the irrational and fools, *children who cannot understand*, and those who neither know nor will learn the Ten Commandments, the Creed nor the Lord’s Prayer.¹²

As indicated in this church order, children who were too young to be catechized and examined were not communed in the Lutheran Church – although the Reformers were aware of the fact that this was done among the Hussite Bohemian Brethren. Luther discusses this in a 1523 letter to Nicholas Hausmann:

¹⁰Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, Part II (translated by Fred Kramer) (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978), p. 302.

¹¹Augsburg Confession XXIV:7 (German), Kolb/Wengert p. 68.

¹²Edward T. Horn, “Liturgical Work of John Brenz,” *Lutheran Church Review*, Vol. I, No. 4 (October 1882), pp. 281-83. Emphasis added.

C. F. W. Walther states that “Those who cannot examine themselves and should therefore not be admitted to the Lord’s Table also include people who are sleeping, unconscious, in the throes of death and unaware of what is happening, insane, and the like” (*American-Lutheran Pastoral Theology* [edited by David W. Loy; translated by Christian C. Tiews] [Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017], p. 223). In the case of a person “who desired the Holy Supper” but who “had become so weak in his understanding and memory that he was able to examine himself only with the help of the preacher and could only repeat what had been said to him, although he had shown himself to be a righteous Christian when his mental powers had been better,” Walther notes that “The theological faculty at Jena recommended that he be admitted [to the Lord’s Supper]” (p. 224).

Right now I do not think badly about the Bohemian Brethren, having heard from their own representatives their faith concerning the Sacrament of the Eucharist. I do not approve of the Bohemians who commune little children, although I do not regard them as heretics in this matter. I have been thinking daily about prescribing a form for doing Mass and giving Communion, but so far I have not been able to release it. Nevertheless, it ought to be proposed that *in the days to come no one be admitted to Communion unless he has been examined and has responded rightly concerning his faith; we should exclude the others*. I also think the weak have been indulged long enough, and that the entire Sacrament ought to be brought back and everybody ought to be communed in both kinds [host and cup], everybody *who desires and understands...*¹³

The Lutherans of the next generation concurred in Luther's views on this matter. Chemnitz writes:

It is clear that one cannot deal with infants through the bare preaching of repentance and remission of sins, for that requires hearing (Rom. 10:17), deliberation and meditation (Ps. 119), understanding (Matt. 13:51), which are not found in infants. With regard to the Lord's Supper Paul says: "Let a man examine himself" [1 Cor. 11:28]. Likewise: "Let him discern the Lord's body" [1 Cor. 11:29], a thing which cannot be ascribed to infants. Moreover, Christ instituted His Supper for such as had already become His disciples. In the Old Testament infants were circumcised on the eighth day, but they were admitted to the eating of the Passover lamb when they were able to ask: "What do you mean by this service?" (Ex. 12:26). There remains therefore [for infants] of the means of grace in the New Testament only the sacrament of Baptism.¹⁴

In their 1577 correspondence with the Patriarch of Constantinople, Lucas Osiander, Jacob Andreae, and Martin Crucius summarize the policy of the Lutherans in Württemberg on the question of infant communion:

We often exhort our people who have repented to partake frequently of the Lord's Supper. However, we do not commune the infants, for Paul says: "Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the Lord's body, eats and drinks judgment upon himself" [1 Cor 11:28-29]. And since the children are not able to examine themselves and, thus, cannot discern the Lord's body, we think that the ceremony of the baptism is sufficient for their salvation, and also the hidden faith with which the Lord has endowed them. For through this faith they spiritually eat the flesh of Christ, even if they do not, in the communion of the supper, physically eat it.¹⁵

Regarding the historicity of the practice of infant communion, Roger T. Beckwith observes that

Infant communion certainly cannot be traced back as far as infant baptism. The first definite reference to infant baptism is in Irenaeus, about 180 A.D., who speaks of "all who through Christ are born again to God, infants and children and boys and young men

¹³Martin Luther, Letter to Nicholas Hausmann (1523); quoted in "Whether the Eucharist Should be Given to Children?", *Lutheran Forum*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (Winter 1996), p. 13. Emphases added.

¹⁴Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, Part II, pp. 165-66.

¹⁵Jacob Andreae, Martin Crucius, and Lucas Osiander, Correspondence with the Patriarch of Constantinople (1577); in George Mastrantonis, translator and editor, *Augsburg and Constantinople* (Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1982), p. 143. Translation slightly revised.

and old men” (*Against Heresies* 2:22:4, or 2:33:2), “born again to God” being a technical phrase meaning baptism, well attested in other parts of Irenaeus’s writings. Considering the small compass of the patristic literature before the time of Irenaeus, this reference is significantly early, and may well reflect a practice originating in New Testament times. The earliest definite reference to infant or child communion, on the other hand, is in Cyprian (*On the Lapsed* 9, 25) about the year 251, after the voluminous writings of Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Hippolytus, and Origen had appeared, without any reference to such a practice...¹⁶

And we should not assume that Cyprian’s teaching and practice on this sacramental question was necessarily in accord with the teaching and practice of the rest of the church in his time, or with the teaching and practice of the church in previous generations. We know that Cyprian’s teaching and practice on another aspect of Christian sacramental theology was *not* sound, and was not accepted by the church as a whole.

In a well-known dispute that took place between Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage, and Stephen, the bishop of Rome, on the question of the validity of baptisms that had been administered among the Novatians or in other schismatic Christian groups, Cyprian’s position was not recognized by the larger church as the Biblical and apostolic position – and is not recognized by Confessional Lutherans today as the Biblical and apostolic position. As G. W. H. Lampe summarizes this controversy, the famous bishop of Carthage maintained that “there is no salvation and no Christianity outside the visible Church,” and that “The Holy Spirit does not operate in sacraments outside the Church.” Therefore, according to Cyprian,

Those who have been ‘baptized’ by schismatics must therefore be baptized upon entering the Church. Only within it is there Christ’s authentic sacrament. ... On Cyprian’s principle, these people had never been baptized at all and must be received into the Church as though they were heathen converts.¹⁷

In contrast, Stephen’s position, “in respect of the question of those baptized in schism who wished to join the majority church,” was that people who had received a washing with water in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit – even if this had taken place among schismatics – “had been baptized, and that since baptism is essentially unrepeatable, they should be admitted” to membership in the orthodox and catholic church without the need to undergo another baptism.¹⁸

Now, if Cyprian *required baptism* for some people who should *not* have been baptized (that is, already-baptized converts from schismatic forms of Christianity), it is not beyond the realm of possibility that he *allowed communion* for some people who should *not* have been communed (that is, infants and very young children). Cyprian lived and wrote more than two centuries after the death and resurrection of Christ. His practice should not simply be assumed to be in accord with the original practice of the church, especially since there is no evidence for his practice in the apostolic and patristic writings that have come down to us from those 200 intervening years.

¹⁶Roger T. Beckwith, “Age of Admission to the Lord’s Supper,” *The Westminster Theological Journal*, Vol. XXXVIII, No. 2 (Winter 1976), p. 125.

¹⁷G. W. H. Lampe, “Christian Theology in the Patristic Period,” in *A History of Christian Doctrine*, edited by Hubert Cunliffe-Jones (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), pp. 171-73.

¹⁸G. W. H. Lampe, “Christian Theology in the Patristic Period,” pp. 173-74.

The Lord's New Testament sacraments are constituted and defined by the divine words through which he originally instituted each sacrament, and through which he indicated the proper use of each sacrament. The Words of Institution for Baptism were *not* addressed to the *recipients* of that sacrament, but to its *ministrants*. In his institution of Baptism, Jesus told his disciples what they were to say as they baptized people from all nations. In contrast, the Words of Institution for Holy Communion, in the first celebration of that Supper, were addressed to the disciples *as communicants*, to whom the body and blood of Christ were being offered. The character of the baptismal institution allows for Baptism to be received passively, such as by an infant, whose intellect is not being directly engaged by the baptismal Words. But the character of the eucharistic institution does not allow for that sacrament to be received passively, by one who is not listening to, and reflecting on, the eucharistic Words that are addressed to him, and that require his attention. Chemnitz picks up on this when he observes that

Paul shows (1 Cor. 11:23-34) *from the rule of the institution* that some among the Corinthians were eating unworthily. And when he wants to show how they could eat the Lord's Supper worthily and with profit, he sets before them *the institution itself* as he had received it from the Lord. ...the mind, from the words of institution, understands, believes with firm assent, and in the use of the Lord's Supper reverently ponders what this sacrament is, what its use is, and what the nature of this whole action is – that here the Son of God, God and man, is Himself present, offering and imparting through the ministry to those who eat, together with the bread and wine, His body and blood, in order that by means of this most precious testimony and pledge He may unite Himself with us and apply, seal, and confirm to us the New Testament covenant of grace. And this faith, resting on the words of institution, excites and shapes reverence and devotion of mind as this sacrament is used. ...*the institution itself shows that this is necessary and required for worthy eating...*¹⁹

The discernment on the part of communicants that is required by the institution of Christ includes not only a discernment of the real presence of the body and blood of Jesus in the consecrated bread and wine, but also a discernment of the sin that infects the communicant's own life. This requirement for a penitential self-examination on the part of those who intend to commune has its basis in "the *forgiveness* of sins" that Jesus' sacramental Words connect to the Lord's Supper. Forgiveness is received by those who acknowledge their sin, and repent of it.

Among those who favor the introduction of infant communion in the Lutheran Church, it has been suggested that Luther's approval of communing people who are "deaf and dumb" implies that he would also approve of communing infants. What is being referred to is the casuistic advice that Luther offers in his "Treatise on the New Testament":

Some have asked whether the sacrament is to be offered also to the deaf and dumb. Some think it a kindness to practice a pious fraud on them and think they should be given unblest wafers. This mockery is not good; it will not please God, who has made them Christians as well as us. They deserve the same things that we do. Therefore *if they are rational and can show by indubitable signs that they desire it in true Christian devotion*, as I have often seen, we should leave to the Holy Spirit what is his work and not refuse him what he demands. It may be that inwardly they have a better understanding and faith than we; and this no one should maliciously oppose. Do we not read of St. Cyprian, the holy martyr, that in Carthage where he was bishop he even had both elements given to the children, although – for reasons of its own – that has now ceased? Christ had the children come to him and would not allow anyone to hinder them

¹⁹Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, Part II, p. 317. Emphases added.

[Mark 10:14]. In like manner he withheld his blessings neither from the dumb nor the blind nor the lame. Why, then, should not his sacrament also be for those who heartily and in a Christian spirit desire it?²⁰

Luther clearly states here that it is permissible to administer communion to those who are handicapped in these ways “if they are rational and can show by indubitable signs that they desire it in true Christian devotion.” The reference to St. Cyprian’s practice of communing infants does not negate the Lutheran principle that Communion should not be administered to those who are not rational, and who cannot show by indubitable signs that they desire it in true Christian devotion. This conviction regarding what is indeed necessary in the preparation and self-examination of communicants, was probably understood by Luther to be among the “reasons” why Cyprian’s practice has actually “now ceased.” A high level of intellectual development, and an ability to recite long and detailed memorized texts, are not necessary prerequisites for admission to the Lord’s Supper. Cyprian’s example is cited as an illustration of the fact that the Christian church has at the very least always recognized that. But it is self-evident from the context that Cyprian’s example is not being cited to justify a belief that communicants need not be rational, or to justify a belief that communicants need not be able to show by indubitable signs that they desire the Lord’s Supper in true Christian devotion, since Luther obviously held no such belief.

It is never wise to base one’s understanding of Luther’s views on any subject either exclusively, or chiefly, on his Table Talk remarks. These remarks are notoriously fragmentary, and have often been transmitted to us without the larger context of the overall conversation in which they were spoken. In his Table Talk remarks Luther was often joking, or was being sarcastic, or was exaggerating his point for effect, or was “thinking out loud” in a somewhat disjointed way on an issue that he may not yet have had an opportunity to consider more carefully. Such things are only to be expected when a clever and jovial man is chatting with friends, informally, around his dinner table.

One particular Table Talk remark has, however, often been cited as evidence that Luther thought that St. Paul’s teaching in his First Epistle to the Corinthians, regarding the need for self-examination on the part of communicants, applies only to potential *adult* communicants, and that this Pauline teaching should not be interpreted as inherently excluding young *children* – who are not capable of examining themselves in this way – from admission to the Sacrament of the Altar. Just before the Table Talk remark in question, Luther is recorded as having said this, concerning Baptism and the intended recipients of Baptism:

The text, “[Let the children come to me, ...for] to such belongs the kingdom of God” [Mark 10:14], is the promise to Abraham. This text clearly speaks about children. One can’t get around it. The text doesn’t speak of adults, such as the apostles now were. Moreover, it says of children, “to such belongs.” That is, “I’m their Christ; I’ve been promised to them. ... Thus we have a promise and command for the baptism of children, because Christ said [Matt. 28:19], “Preach to all nations, [baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,]” as if he would say, “I wish to be the God of all.” ...baptism is for all nations, large and small, young and old. ...we say and we warn that children be brought promptly for baptism.²¹

²⁰Martin Luther, “A Treatise on the New Testament,” *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 35 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), pp. 110-11. Emphasis added.

²¹Martin Luther, Table Talk #365; *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 54 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), pp. 55 and 58.

Luther's chief point is that Baptism is for children, because Baptism is for everyone, according to the Lord's institution of Baptism.

Immediately after Luther had made these comments about the scope of Baptism, and about the promise and command of Baptism, one of his listeners was prompted to inquire if the Lord's Supper should be thought of in the same way. This Wittenberg table companion seems to have been thinking that perhaps the intended recipients of the Lord's Supper are the same as the intended recipients of Baptism, and that the two sacraments are alike in this respect. This supposition is shared by many today who advocate the introduction of infant communion in the Lutheran Church. When this particular individual asked the Reformer "whether the Lord's Supper should be given to children," he received this response:

I reply: There is no urgency about the sacrament of the altar. So there's no command concerning prayer, but there's a precept that when we pray we should expect to be heard [cf. 1 John 5:14]. Nor is there a precept about afflictions, although those who are afflicted ought to be patient [cf. II Cor. 6:4]. However, it doesn't follow that the children are damned who either do not pray or are not afflicted. When in I Corinthians [11:28] Paul said that a man should examine himself [and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup], he spoke only of adults because he was speaking about those who were quarreling among themselves. However, he doesn't here forbid that the sacrament of the altar be given even to children.²²

The main question that is being addressed here, is whether the church has a promise and command for the *communing* of children that is comparable to the promise and command that it has from God for the *baptizing* of children. The answer to that question is No. Because God has attached such a promise and command to Baptism, it is a matter of urgency that children be baptized, and their baptism should not be delayed. But since God has not attached a similar promise and command to the communing of children, there is no comparable urgency that children be communed.

God *has*, however, attached a promise and command to the communing of *adults* – or at least to the communing of *certain* adults. God does not direct or invite children to commune, but he does direct or invite adults who have examined themselves to commune. This self-examination would be a penitential self-examination, on account of the quarreling and other sins that these adult communicants have been committing.

Another important thing to notice in these sequential Table Talk remarks, in the form in which they have come down to us, is that the passages of Scripture that Luther cites to make his points – regarding Baptism and the Lord's Supper – are largely *abbreviated*. It is possible that Luther himself abbreviated them as he spoke at table, knowing that his listeners were familiar with these texts, and that they would realize that Luther wanted them to think of the entirety of each text and not just the recited portion. It is also possible that Luther himself did quote these texts in their entirety, but that Luther's words were abbreviated by the scribe who jotted them down. In any case, in Luther's Table Talk remarks as they appear above (excerpted from the American Edition of *Luther's Works*), we have editorially *added* the *bracketed* portions of Matthew 28:19 and of 1 Corinthians 11:28 – as these verses are cited paraphrastically by Luther – in order to demonstrate the full impact of those cited passages for Luther's purposes. (The American Edition editors already added the bracketed portion of Mark 10:14, obviously for the same reason.)

²²Martin Luther, Table Talk #365, p. 58.

It is significant that in the abbreviated portion of Matthew 28:19 that appears in the published Table Talk text, the Lord's explicit reference to *baptizing* all nations is not even included. And yet, Luther's commentary on this passage is specifically about the command to *baptize*, and the divine promise connected to *baptism*, that are found *in* this passage. So, too, would we suggest that Luther's reference to, and commentary on, 1 Corinthians 11:28, is also intended to be understood as a reference to, and as a commentary on, the entire verse, and not just the first few words of the verse that were actually recited or printed. What Luther is actually commenting on, then, is the Pauline command to adult communicants to examine themselves, and then to eat the body of Christ, and drink the blood of Christ. He is not saying that children who are not yet able to examine themselves are nevertheless to be allowed to receive the body and blood of Christ, without such self-examination. In fact, his point is just the opposite.

Luther's central emphasis here is that the divine command (through St. Paul) in 1 Corinthians 11:28, pertaining to preparation for the Lord's Supper and reception of the Lord's Supper, is not directed to children at all. To be sure, Luther points out that Paul does not explicitly *forbid* that the Lord's Supper be given to children either. When Paul talks here about who should or should not commune, he is simply not talking about "children" one way or the other. Or at least he is not talking about uninstructed children who are not yet capable of examining themselves.

In view of Luther's paedobaptist beliefs and assumptions, his comparison between the invitation of "children" to baptism, and the non-invitation of "children" to the Lord's Supper, does clearly suggest that he is mostly speaking of very young children. When such children become old enough to examine themselves, and when they have been instructed from God's Word and the Catechism in how to examine themselves correctly, then for Paul's (and Luther's) purposes – as touching the subject of readiness for admission to the sacrament – such children have, in effect, now become "adults," who like their parents quarrel among themselves and commit other sins, of which they can and should repent.

Contrary to classic Lutheran faith and practice, and contrary to classic Lutheran standards for spiritual oversight and pastoral care in conjunction with admission to the Lord's Supper, infants and small children are now communed in many liberal and post-Confessional Lutheran church bodies – such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada. This practice was introduced – predictably – after many years of a lax "open communion" practice for adults in those churches. If adults with no Lutheran catechesis were now allowed to admit themselves to the altar in a Lutheran congregation, then why not allow the uncatechized children of members likewise to be admitted? But *Confessional* Lutherans, who wish to remain faithful to classic Lutheran standards for spiritual oversight and pastoral care in conjunction with admission to the Lord's Supper, do not admit infants to this sacrament. Neither do they admit uncatechized or non-Lutheran adults.

When the Formula of Concord states that "there is only one kind of unworthy guest, those who do not believe,"²³ this is in the context of addressing Martin Bucer's false distinction between "unworthy" believers (who in the sacrament receive the body and blood of Christ to their judgment) and "ungodly" unbelievers (who in the sacrament receive only bread and wine). This distinction is rejected. But in the context of discussing a proper preparation for the sacrament on the part of those who do believe, the Formula of Concord elsewhere states that worthy guests at the Lord's altar are those "who are terrified in their hearts by the immensity and

²³Epitome VII:18, Kolb/Wengert p. 506.

number of their sins,” and “who feel the weakness of their faith and deplore it, and who desire with all their heart to serve God with a stronger, more resolute faith and purer obedience.”²⁴

While neither the Scriptures nor the Confessions establish an exact age or level of intellectual development at which this kind of conscious reflection and resolve is understood to be possible, it is certainly not possible with infants – or with anyone who has not been instructed in the chief articles of the Christian faith in general, and in the full meaning and implications of the Words of Institution for the Lord’s Supper in particular. In regard to the general level of maturity and age at which catechized children were usually first admitted to the Lord’s Supper in the Reformation era, Friedrich Bente informs us not only that the great Wittenberg Reformer would often exhort his adult listeners to receive the Lord’s body and blood more frequently, but that

Luther was accustomed to direct his admonition to partake of the Lord’s Supper diligently also to children, and that, too, to children of comparatively tender years. In his sermon of March 25, 1529, he says: “This exhortation ought not only to move us older ones, but also the young and the children. Therefore you parents ought to instruct and educate them in the doctrine of the Lord: the Decalog, the Creed, the Prayer, and the Sacraments. Such children ought also to be admitted to the Table that they may be partakers” [of the Lord’s Supper]. (W. 30, 1, 233.) In his sermon of December 19, 1528, we read: “Hence, you parents and heads of families, invite your subordinates to this Sacrament, and we shall demand an account of you if you neglect it. If you will not go yourselves, let the young go; we are much concerned about them. When they come, we shall learn, by examining them, how you instruct them in the Word as prescribed. Hence, do come more frequently to the Sacrament, and also admonish your children to do so when they have reached the age of discretion. ...” (121f.) The tender age at which the young were held to partake of the Lord’s Supper appears from [Johannes] Bugenhagen’s preface to the Danish edition of the Enchiridion of 1538, where he says “that after this confession is made, also the little children of about eight years or less should be admitted to the table of Him who says: ‘Suffer the little children to come unto Me.’” (433.)²⁵

Luther’s statement in the Smalcald Articles, that “a seven-year-old child knows what the church is: holy believers and ‘the little sheep who hear the voice of their shepherd,’”²⁶ may, therefore, also reflect his general expectation of the age at which an instructed and examined child would typically be ready to participate in the Lord’s Supper.

In the context of understanding that people will “receive confirmation instruction before they are admitted to Holy Communion,” and that confirmation is the public rite by which a person becomes a communicant member of the church, C. F. W. Walther in the nineteenth century pushed this age forward a bit, writing that, “As far as the age required for receiving confirmation is concerned, for the most part the completion of the twelfth year may well be the earliest (Luke 2:41-42).”²⁷ In the twentieth century, John H. C. Fritz essentially agreed with Walther that “Children ought not to be confirmed before they are at least twelve years old,” but went on to say that

²⁴Solid Declaration VII:69, Kolb/Wengert p. 605.

²⁵Friederich Bente, “Historical Introduction to the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church,” p. 82; in *Concordia Triglotta* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921).

²⁶Smalcald Articles III:12:2, Kolb/Wengert pp. 324-25.

²⁷C. F. W. Walther, *American-Lutheran Pastoral Theology*, p. 307.

The usual age of confirmation is fourteen; a year or two older is always better than a year or two younger. A congregation should, however, make no strict rule in reference to the age of confirmation, but leave this to the discretion of the pastor and perhaps the church council.²⁸

The Lutheran Reformers of the sixteenth century were aware of the practice of infant communion. They were aware of its history.²⁹ They were aware of the theological rationale for it.³⁰ And they were aware of the fact that it was at that time a *current* practice in the Eastern Church and among at least some of the Hussites. As the Reformers evaluated this practice, they did so from the vantage point of a careful reading of St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians; and in light of the apostle's teaching there regarding the institution of the Lord's Supper, and regarding the intended recipients of the Lord's Supper according to that institution. On this Scriptural basis, the Lutheran Reformers led the church in an evangelical "reformation" of its understanding of the true character and purpose of this sacrament, in such a way as to rule out the permissibility of infant communion.

Orthodox Lutheranism does indeed have an established doctrine and practice of the Lord's Supper, reflected in its official Confessions, and elaborated on in the private writings of its honored Confessors. According to this established doctrine and practice, one of the unique features of the sacrament of Holy Communion (as compared to the sacrament of Holy Baptism) is the requirement that those who receive it not simply be assumed to be possessed of a *passive* faith, but that they also be known to have a *discerning* and *reflexive* faith – to the extent that this can be known by means of a preceding pastoral examination of their beliefs and of their reasons for wanting to commune. As John T. Pless writes:

The apostolic teaching that a man examine himself (I Corinthians 11:28) cannot reasonably be interpreted as to exclude the noetic dimension of which infants/toddlers are not capable. Paul speaks of self-examination in verse 28 in conjunction with "discerning" (*diakrino*) the body in verse 29. ...this term means to separate, arrange, make a distinction, differentiate, evaluate, judge. ...this is no ordinary meal but a communion in the body and blood of the Lord. Communicants are not to eat and drink without the discernment of this reality.³¹

David Jay Webber
Phoenix, Arizona
October 13, 2017
(revised)

²⁸ John H. C. Fritz, *Pastoral Theology: A Handbook of Scriptural Principles Written Especially for Pastors of the Lutheran Church* (second edition, revised) (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1945), p. 108.

²⁹ See Martin Luther, "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," *Luther's Works*, Vol. 36 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), pp. 25-26. See also Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, Part II, pp. 365-66, 421-22, and 435.

³⁰ See Martin Luther, "The Feast of the Holy Corpus Christi," *Festival Sermons of Martin Luther: The Church Postils* (Dearborn, Michigan: Mark V Publications, 2005), Summer Section, p. 48. See also Martin Luther, "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," pp. 19-20.

³¹ John T. Pless, "Theses on Infant/Toddler Communion" (2013), Thesis 2.