

A Communion Table for the Baptized

In the last issue of the Lexington Theological Quarterly [40:2 (2005):127-30], Professor Sharon Warner argued that churches should include unbaptized children among the participants at the Lord's Supper. She argued this point on the basis of theories of faith development and a distinction between belief and faith. I would offer a counter to this view by broadening out theological resources so that Scripture and the church's tradition offer a word. I propose to do this by thinking about the meaning of the Table, and by thought about the Table and baptism.

Though we will not all agree about the details of what participation at the Table means, it must be more than receptive thoughts about Jesus. Coming to the Table must entail more than thinking that Jesus had some good ideas and that we might think about following some of them. In fact, the elements themselves signal that more than considering following Jesus is involved in participation. Coming to this Table involves a commitment of one's life to God, a commitment to live a life patterned on the life patterned on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The focus of the elements is squarely on the death of Jesus and that is how the early church understood it. It is the reminder of the body and blood of Christ *given for us* (however we might understand that). There is a lever of cognition and mental development and commitment necessary to take part in such a reminder appropriately.

The signal of coming to faith in a way that appropriates this gift for ourselves is baptism. Baptism is the formalization of our commitment to live for God and see God present in Jesus. It is at that point that we commit our lives to recognition of Christ as Lord and Savior. In the New Testament and throughout church history, baptism has been the initiation into the church. Professor Warner is certainly correct that children raised in the church often do not have "conversion experiences," but at some point they must make the faith their own. From the earliest times, baptism is the moment at which people have become members of the church, the time when they dedicate their lives to God, the ritual by which they become heirs of God's kingdom, children of God of a special sort. It is as citizens of this community and as heirs within this community that Christians come to the Table.



It is important that this Table be reserved for the baptized because the church has seen this as a moment during which the presence of God is particularly powerful in the context of the gathered community. As Paul talks about it in 1 Corinthians 11, proper participation brings with it blessings from God and improper participation explains why some in the church have had problems. While we do not want to posit the improper eating at the Table will bring illness, the point of the passage is that God is present here in a way that requires a proper recognition of who God is, who Christ is, and what God expects of God's people. This kind of a meeting of God and turning to God for sustenance requires a level of both cognition and commitment.

In both the New Testament and the church's tradition, baptism is the moment of each person's entrance into full membership in the church. In the New Testament, baptism is the moment when the Spirit comes to live in a person, the moment one "puts on Christ," the event at which the person claims the life of faith and is claimed by God through the enactment of the death of resurrection of Christ. It is at that moment that the baptized receives a new identity that is to determine the orientation of all of life. If baptism does not signify such things, there is little reason to maintain believer's baptism (perhaps any kind). These rich understandings of baptism identify

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that act as significant for both the person and the community. Baptism should be much more than graduation from the middle school Lenten series class. Part of the reason many Disciples oppose the practice of baptizing those who come to the denomination from another tradition is that God acts at baptism in a way that is not repeatable. Such an understanding of baptism elevates its meaning in ways that recognize it as an entrance into the church through an act of God, an act that brings God's blessing and gives access to the gifts of God.

It seems to me that inviting the unbaptized to the Table belittles both the Table and baptism. Beyond that, it belittles the acts of God those things represent. This is not, of course, the intention to those who invite children. But I think these are the theological and communal results.

Communion

There certainly needs to be ways that children are welcomed into the life of the church before baptism. Various congregations have ways of doing this (children's choirs, etc.). Having children wait until they are baptized to partake of the Table is not barring the way to God, but designating moments that encourage them to think (at the appropriate level for their age) about the confessions and commitments of those who do partake. They can ask, "What is special about this meal?" Such questions require us to be ready to interpret our faith and lead the next generation to meaningful participation and substantive commitment to life in the church to those who are devoted to serving God through Christ.

End Notes

¹ John Hinant, "Children at the Lord's Table," 2005, unpublished paper, 54. In this paper Hinant shares not only the full results of the survey but also comprehensive research into the practice of communing children through the tradition. He explores the practice in the time of the apostles through the fifteenth century as well as in Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed and Disciple traditions. His research shows that children's participation in communion was the general practice of the Western Church for at least two thirds of its history until the efforts of Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) took it away. It has always been the practice of the Eastern Church.

² Hinant, 56.

³ This assertion is a plea for a church policy. We all recognize that given a common practice of the church an individual parent may or may not follow that common practice. But at least, when a parent makes a decision vis à vis the church's position on the issue that parent decides to follow the church's position or counter it. The parent is not making a decision in a vacuum or in an ambiguous situation of "it is up to you." By virtue of a church's explicit policy, the church confronts parents with the claim that "it is not up to you"; this is a wider issue.

⁴ Horace Bushnell, *Christian Nurture* (Charles Scribner, 1861; reprint Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 10.

⁵ See the work of James Fowler, especially *Stages of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), Chapters 2 and 3.

⁶ In the faith development research and literature faith is understood as a verb, as an activity of "setting one's heart upon." See the work of James Fowler.

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