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Children and Communion

The Lord's Supper and children's participation

Darius Jankiewicz

While maintaining that Adventists practice "open Communion," the *Seventh-day Adventist Minister's Manual* states that unbaptized children should not participate in the ordinance of the Lord's Supper.¹ The manual, however, does not provide an adequate theological explanation for its stance. This is perhaps why, in practice, Adventist congregations approach this issue in a variety of ways. In some churches, children and unbaptized teenagers are indeed precluded from participation; in others, families take part together, the parents deciding if and when their children are ready to understand the significance of this ordinance. In churches uncomfortable with either of these options, children may participate in a separate Communion service, complete with footwashing and "unblessed" bread and wine. This ambiguity may have its source in a lack of theological clarity regarding the ordinances of baptism and Communion. Thus, a brief discussion regarding the scriptural understanding of these ordinances, as well as their interrelationship, is necessary.

From the New Testament rituals to sacramental theology

While the New Testament does, to some extent, explore the nature of these ordinances, the question of their mutual relationship, or the order in which they should be administered, appears to be of no concern to the New Testament writers. According to them, baptism and the Lord's Supper had primarily symbolic significance (Rom. 6:3–5; Col. 2:12; 1 Cor. 11:24; John 6:53–56). Baptism was seen as a public declaration of one's new birth and allegiance, and an individual was also incorporated into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13). Additionally, participating in the Lord's Supper symbolized one's commitment to Christ. This communal meal was celebrated in remembrance of Christ's sacrifice on the cross, as well as for the enrichment of one's relationship with Him. Apart from the issue of "worthiness"

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One of the Seventh-day Adventist fundamental beliefs, "The Lord's Supper," states that "the communion service is open to all believing Christians."¹ While this statement does not address the question of whether unbaptized children of church members should take part in the Communion service, the *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* states that "after receiving formal instruction in baptismal classes and making their commitment to Jesus in baptism, they are thereby prepared to partake in the service [Communion] themselves."² No age limitation is given in the reference to "all believing Christians," nor does it state that "all believing Christians" must be baptized.

The question of participation in Communion by children who are not baptized was discussed at the 1980 General Conference Session.³ Helpful insight is also given in the "Bible Questions" column by Ángel Manuel Rodríguez.⁴ The issue is still being discussed and it is a topic that pastors have to deal with. At the 1980 General Conference Session, W. B. Quigley appealed, "I would like to recommend that both areas be studied."⁵ One of those areas he stated was the question of children and Communion. In the spirit of wanting to study this topic further, we offer two articles that reach different conclusions. We hope that our readers will find the articles helpful.

—Editors

- 1 *Seventh-day Adventists Believe* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 2005), 225.
- 2 *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 2005), 85.
- 3 "Sixth Business Meeting," *Adventist Review*, 22 April, 1980; "Tenth Business Meeting," *Adventist Review*, 24 April, 1980; "Fifteenth Business Meeting," *Adventist Review*, 1 May, 1980.
- 4 Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, "Children and the Lord's Supper," *Adventist World*, June 2006, 40.
- 5 "Tenth Business Meeting," *Adventist Review*, 24 April, 1980, 29.

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(1 Cor. 11:27), we find no instruction as to who could participate.

During the post-apostolic era (second to fourth century A.D.), these ordinances, now called *sacraments*, came to be seen as a "means of grace"; that is, when a sacrament was received, God's grace was supernaturally infused into the believer's soul. For this to happen, however, one had to have been baptized into the church. Baptism, the gateway into the church, imprinted human souls with an indelible mark or seal (called *Dominicus character*) that separated those who were baptized from the rest of humanity for the rest of their lives.² This seal, validated during the sacrament of confirmation, enabled believers to benefit from the sacrament of the Eucharist, i.e., to receive God's grace through partaking of the emblems.³ Additionally, the fourth century saw the introduction of the belief that, following the words of consecration, the bread and the wine changed into the actual body and blood of Christ.⁴

Thus, the elements were worthy of veneration, that is, a form of worship. In this way, the sacrifice of Christ was *reenacted* on behalf of believers each time they participated in the Eucharist, regardless of their spiritual disposition. The benefits of the sacrifice, however, were not transferred to them if their souls were not especially enabled through baptism. In this way, a causal

relationship between baptism and the Lord's Supper was established. Thus, according to Roman Catholic (and later Orthodox) teaching, baptism qualifies a person to take part in the Eucharist. Unless these sacraments are administered in the prescribed order, the fullness of salvation is not available.

The Protestant Reformers refuted the Roman Catholic understanding of the sacraments on several grounds; they insisted on the primacy of the Word of God and, most significantly, argued that faith, and not the sacraments, was the means of God's grace. The sacraments now represented God's promises and were a sign of Christ's presence. Participation was viewed primarily as a sign of grace already given rather than being the "means of grace" *per se*. The Reformers considered the sacraments to be no more beneficial to the believer than other forms of proclamation, such as a sermon or personal witness.⁵ The sequence of the sacraments and especially the causal relationship between baptism and the Lord's Supper, so crucial to Catholicism, was no longer an issue. It may be conjectured, however, that the Reformers did not depart significantly from Catholic tradition on this point. With the exception of the radical branch of the Reformation, the Reformers continued the Catholic tradition of infant baptism; thus, it was natural that baptism preceded the Lord's Supper.

Theological considerations

Cutting through the sacramental crust that at times obscures biblical teaching regarding baptism and Communion helps us to reflect on several important issues.

First, in contrast to Catholic theology, it must be affirmed that participation in the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper is not necessary for salvation.⁶ While baptism symbolizes a new beginning, the person being baptized is already under the grace of God. This does not say that the New Testament negates the relationship between conversion and baptism. This relationship, however, does not appear to be absolute, with the thief on the cross, who was converted but had no chance to be baptized, as an example. (Luke 23:40-43; cf. 19:9).⁷

Second, Catholic teaching that identified baptism as a seal and Communion a vehicle of God's salvific grace is clearly unscriptural. While baptism may have significant and lasting spiritual benefits, the act itself does not bestow God's grace or salvation, nor does it, in some imperceptible way, enable the believer to receive the benefits of Communion. Reacting to the strict sacramentalism of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions, some Protestants maintain that Communion has purely symbolic meaning. In agreement with the Reformed tradition, however, it can be stated that, as an act of worship, Communion is more than a memorial because it presents an opportunity for believers to be drawn closer to Christ, who is present spiritually among the believers.⁸

Third, Catholic theology maintains that, following the blessing, the bread and wine change into the real, albeit invisible, body and blood of Christ. Biblically, however, the prayer that precedes Communion appears to say nothing more than "Thank You" to Jesus for His sacrifice (Matt. 26:27; Luke 22:17; 1 Cor. 10:16). Since nothing really happens to the bread and wine, offering it to children should not present a theological problem. By the same token, the practice of offering children "unblessed" bread and wine, however well intended, is theologically misguided.⁹ Those who

participate, rather than the bread and wine, are the ones blessed.

Fourth, for the above-mentioned reasons, Catholic theology advocates a "closed Communion." In contrast, Adventists have advocated the opposite, as they have seen no biblical reason to limit participation in Communion to church members.¹⁰

Finally, we need to decide the status of unbaptized children and teenagers in the church. While unbaptized children may not yet have their names on the church roll, they are nevertheless an important part of the family of God¹¹ with salvation available to both children and baptized members alike (Matt. 18:3, 4; 19:14).¹² The entire family, from the youngest to the oldest, participated in and was blessed by the ritual of the Passover¹³ (Exod. 12:25–27), a practice that persists to this day among orthodox Jews.¹⁴ Likewise, both children and baptized members can be blessed by participating in the Lord's Supper, an ordinance that was typified by the Passover.

Ellen White's position

According to Ellen White, church ordinances continue as a time when the worship experience is elevated to the highest levels. They also promote a spirit of communion, forgiveness, and humility.¹⁵ These rituals, however, are not the vehicles of salvation. "Salvation is not to be baptized, not to have our names upon the church books, not to preach the truth. But it is a living union with Jesus Christ."¹⁶ This living union with Christ rarely occurs instantaneously in the believer's heart; rather, this union becomes a lifelong process, of which baptism is but a part. Although Ellen White counsels that baptism is desirable as soon as possible for young believers, "there should be no undue haste to receive the ordinance."¹⁷

In contrast with strict memorialism, Ellen White maintained that "[Communion] forms a living connection by which the believer is bound up with Christ, and thus bound up with the Father. In a special sense it forms a connection between dependent human beings and God."¹⁸

On the basis of the published writings of Ellen G. White, it appears that she

also ardently supported an "open Communion." Of all her comments on the matter, the following are perhaps the most poignant and unambiguous: "Christ's example *forbids exclusiveness* at the Lord's Supper."¹⁹ "There may come into the company persons who are not in heart servants of truth and holiness, but who may wish to take part in the service. They should not be forbidden. . . . He [Christ] is there to convict and soften the heart."²⁰ This statement clearly allows the participation of anyone who wishes it, even though they may not understand the full meaning of the ordinance or be prepared for it. Christ's role, she insisted, includes the convicting and softening of the heart. If *anyone* can be invited to participate, why should the children of the church be excluded? Would not Christ be willing to work with children?²¹

Nowhere in Ellen White's published or unpublished writings, and this should not come as a surprise, do we find a definitive stand on the issue of children's participation.²²

Putting it all together

In view of the above considerations, it may be concluded that there are no substantial biblical or theological reasons that would preclude unbaptized children's participation in Communion. Scripturally, baptism does not appear to

be a marking point of participation. Making it such may contribute to viewing baptism as either a magical or mystical event or a maturity passage, something baptism was never intended to be.

Believer baptism, in contrast to infant baptism, assumes a vital relationship with Jesus and an understanding of salvation through grace, as well as a knowledge of doctrinal teachings. It also assumes a readiness to accept the responsibilities that come with church membership. Young children may have a vital relationship with Jesus as well as an understanding of salvation through grace.²³ However, they may not yet have a clear understanding of doctrinal teachings or of the meaning and responsibility of church membership (e.g., attendance at business meetings). For this reason, children who are part of the faith community may be ready to participate in and be blessed by Communion but not be mature enough for baptism.


When, therefore, might a young child be ready to participate in the ordinance of Communion? First, a certain level of understanding on the part of the recipient is necessary. Jesus' use of the word *remembrance* (Luke 22:19) reinforces this concept. Thus, perhaps very young children should wait until they gain some comprehension of the ritual and its symbolism.

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Second, research in faith development may give us some guidance. The foundations for faith development are laid in infancy, when, depending on the environment, an infant learns either to trust or to fear. If “seeds of trust, courage, hope, and love” are sown, a foundation for faith development is laid.²⁴ Between the ages of two and seven, children’s understanding is intuitive, even though they lack the thought processes necessary to understand the abstract concepts of religion. It has been argued that the symbols that a child is exposed to, as well as the stories and examples of parental faith, form lasting impressions and can powerfully influence the faith of a young child.²⁵ Between the ages of six and eight, however, children typically begin to “appropriate the stories, beliefs and practices that symbolize belonging to the faith community.”²⁶

Parents who have nurtured their child’s faith will know their child’s heart, and they are the ones, with the assistance of the church pastor, who should decide when their child is ready to participate in Communion. They will know when their child believes in Jesus, loves Him, understands what He did on the cross, and has a desire to be with Him in heaven. They will also know when their child understands the concepts of wrongdoing, repentance, and forgiveness. “If properly instructed, very young children may have correct views of their state as sinners and of the way of salvation through Christ.”²⁷ In fact, the simple faith of a six-year-old may, at times, embarrass his more sophisticated parents. It is no accident that Jesus pointed to a young child as an example of faith (see Matt. 18:3; Mark 10:15).²⁸ Connecting a complete catechetical process that results in baptism with readiness for participation in Communion may send the erroneous message that until doctrinal knowledge is obtained, children are not fit to be a part of the family of God. In contrast, participating in Communion with the church family should, ideally, awaken a longing that eventually results in a mature walk with Jesus and a decision for baptism.²⁹

Unfortunately, some families view the Communion service as divisive, that is, separating families rather than

uniting them, thus providing an excuse for avoiding church that day. A family oriented Communion service, in which children are prepared by the parents beforehand, seated with them during the service, and instructed throughout about the meaning of Communion (Exod. 12:26, 27) could revolutionize the way in which this ordinance is experienced by the community of faith. As parents see the wonder of Christ’s sacrifice through their children’s eyes, their faith will be rejuvenated. As children participate, their faith strengthens as their place in the community of faith is affirmed. The role of the community is to assist parents in nurturing their children’s faith and to embrace children as an important part of the church.

As Seventh-day Adventists, we have always practiced open Communion, and for good reasons. If strangers and their children are allowed, indeed encouraged, to participate in the ordinance, how can we exclude our own children? Let us be true to our words by rejecting any form of sacramentalism and opening the way for our children to participate in this special time with Jesus. ■

1 The actual statement reads, “Seventh-day Adventists observe open Communion. Adults who feel they have committed their lives to Christ may participate. . . . Children, however, should not participate until they are mature enough to have received formal instruction in the meaning of the service and committed themselves to Christ in baptism.” *Seventh-day Adventist Minister’s Manual* (Silver Spring, MD: The Ministerial Association, General Conference of SDA, 1992), 212.

2 *Catechism of the Catholic Church. Libreria Editrice Vaticana* (Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 1994), 2.1.1274. It must be noted that by the third or fourth century A.D. the belief that baptism should be offered to infants had developed. This raised the need for another rite, known as *confirmation*, which confirmed the child’s wish to become a full-fledged member of the Catholic Church when he or she reached the age of accountability.

3 This doctrine later became known as *ex opere operato* (literally: “by the very fact of the action’s being performed”), i.e., mere participation in the sacrament would result in the benefit of grace; although the receptive spiritual disposition was considered helpful. *Ibid.*, 2.2.1128.

4 This change was later designated as *transubstantiation*.

5 Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, in Luther Works, 56 vols., ed. Abdel Ross Wentz (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1959), 66–7;

Jaroslav Pelikan, *A History of the Development of Doctrine: Reformation of Church and Dogma* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 177, 187–92, 317–9. Cf. Martin Luther, *Small Catechism* (Adelaide: United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Australia, 1941), 13.

6 Ellen G. White, *Child Guidance* (Nashville: Southern Pub. Assn., 1954), 499, 500.

7 With regard to John 3:5, where Jesus states that “no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit,” commentators are divided. Many believe that this statement may not actually refer to the actual rite of baptism, as this would negate the doctrine of salvation by faith. They suggest that *water* may refer to the purifying action of the Holy Spirit rather than to the rite of baptism.

8 White, *Evangelism* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1946), 278. Herbert Kiesler observes, “the Lord’s Supper is more than a mere memorial meal, for Christ is present by His Holy Spirit. Participation in the Communion service by members of the body contributes to Christian growth and fellowship. The Communion service commemorates deliverance from sin, signifies corporate Communion with Christ, and anticipates the Second Advent.” Raoul Dederen, ed., “The Ordinances: Baptism, Foot Washing, and Lord’s Supper,” in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 2000), 604.

9 See “Letters to the Editor,” *Record: Official Paper of the South Pacific Division*, November 6, 2004, 13.

10 See excellent article by Frank Holbrook, in “For Members Only?” *Ministry*, February 1987, 10–3.

11 “Never allow your children to suppose that they are not children of God until they are old enough to be baptized.” White, *Child Guidance*, 499. Cf. *idem*, 486–92.

12 White, *Evangelism*, 579, 80.

13 Holbrook, 13.

14 In Jewish tradition, the entire family, including the youngest child, was to participate in the Passover celebration, while the parents taught their children the meaning of the service. In a conversation with an Orthodox Jewish rabbi, I was informed that, to this day, Jewish children participate in the Passover prior to their Bar/Bat Mitzvah, which is a formal acknowledgement that the child is a mature follower of God.

15 White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1940), 642–61.

16 White, *Evangelism*, 319.

17 White, *Child Guidance*, 499.

18 White, *Desire of Ages*, 661.

19 White, *Evangelism*, 277 (emphasis mine).

20 White, *The Desire of Ages*, 656.

21 White, *Evangelism*, 580.

22 There is one indirect statement that would seem to preclude unbaptized children from participating in the Lord’s Supper. In response to a query on the matter from A. H. Peet, dated March 1, 1904, Ellen White’s secretary, Sarah McEnterfer, wrote, “But she [Mrs. White] says that it has never been made a practice that children who have not united with the church by baptism should partake of the ordinance any more than should grown people

who have never united with the church." It is to be noted that these words do not come from Mrs. White's pen and are not a direct quotation; the historical context of this statement is unknown; and there is the possibility of misunderstanding on the part of the secretary, who, in the same letter, makes the statement that she "was led to believe." Moreover, this statement stands in contradiction to the published statement quoted above, as it would clearly advocate closed Communion. For these reasons, this statement should perhaps not be taken into consideration.

23 White, *Child Guidance*, 486.

24 Scott Lowndale, "Faith Development Across the Life Span: Fowler's Integrative Work," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 25 (1997): 57.

25 C. Daniel Batson, Patricia Schoenrade, and W. Larry Ventis, *Religion and the Individual: A Social Psychological Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 72; Lowndale, 58.

26 Lowndale, 58.

27 White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1 (Mountain View: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1948), 400.

28 White, *Evangelism*, 579, 80.

29 "He [Christ] is there to convict and soften the heart." White, *The Desire of Ages*, 656.

churches—provided that they have received some kind of baptism—to participate in our celebrations of the Lord's Supper.

But the statement has been pressed far beyond its original intention when used to support the allowing of participation by persons who have never received any kind of Christian baptism. An examination of the context shows that Ellen G. White makes this comment in connection with Christ's including Judas Iscariot at the table. Her point is we have no right to exclude someone from the Supper on the basis of whatever secret sins or insincerity we might suspect this person harbors.

The reasons for discouraging unbaptized persons of any age from partaking in Communion are biblical, historical, spiritual, logical, and pastoral.

Biblical reasons. On the basis of John 13, Seventh-day Adventists regard footwashing as a part of the Communion

eat or drink of your Eucharist except those who have been baptized in the Lord's Name. For concerning this also did the Lord say, 'Give not that which is holy to the dogs' " (*Didache* 9:5). For many centuries the common practice was to separate the preaching service from the Communion service and to send unbaptized persons home after the preaching and before the Communion.

Spiritual reasons. An unbaptized person, especially a child, who partakes of the elements of the Lord's Supper before becoming a baptized Christian can hardly be expected to develop a sense of the privilege and special blessing involved. It can only be common—and commonplace—to him or her. While we should avoid superstition and any idea of *ex opere operato*, we dare not allow this wondrous occasion to seem common or routine.

Logical reasons. A natural and logical order exists among the ordinances. Baptism signifies the birth of faith and

Unbaptized children and Communion

Robert M. Johnston

An unfortunate practice occurs in some Seventh-day Adventist churches, perhaps as a result of ignoring the context of a statement by Ellen White in *The Desire of Ages*, page 656. The first part of the paragraph reads as follows:

"Christ's example forbids exclusiveness at the Lord's Supper. It is true that open sin excludes the guilty. This the Holy Spirit plainly teaches. 1 Cor. 5:11. But beyond this none are to pass judgment. God has not left it with men to say who shall present themselves on these occasions. For who can read the heart? Who can distinguish the tares from the wheat?"

This statement provides the basis of what we call open Communion. Unlike certain denominations, Seventh-day Adventists permit members of other

GOD HAS NOT LEFT IT WITH MEN TO SAY WHO SHALL PRESENT THEMSELVES ON THESE OCCASIONS.

service. What applies to the basin applies also to the table. In John 13:10, Jesus makes clear that baptism is a prerequisite of footwashing. In this verse, two key Greek words are used: *louein* and *niptein*. The first word is used for bathing, and in this context, it represents baptism. The second word represents footwashing. Just as one who has not bathed is not made clean by washing only the feet, even so an unbaptized person is not made clean by the ordinance of footwashing, which here synecdochically stands for the entire Communion experience. At this point we should remember the powerful warning in 1 Corinthians 11:27–32 against partaking of the Supper unworthily.

Historical reasons. Christian tradition, until relatively modern times, reveals agreement that Communion is only for baptized persons. The earliest surviving church manual, dating from early in the second century A.D., says, "But let none

commitment while Communion nurtures it. You cannot nurture that which has not been born. One is the beginning, the other the continuation. Ellen G. White writes that "We are not prepared for communion with Him unless cleansed by His efficacy."*

Pastoral reasons. If a child is old enough to partake of Communion, why is not he or she old enough to be baptized? Is Communion less sacred and important than baptism? If any person wants to partake in the Supper, let that person give decisive expression to their commitment to Christ by receiving baptism. ❏

* Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assoc., 1940), 649 (see also p. 646).

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