

Excerpted from Report of Theological Forum to the GA 2018

Children and Communion

Having been instructed at the 2017 General Assembly “to re-examine the Church’s current understanding that all children must be baptised prior to sharing in the Lord’s Supper, within the context of the New Testament and the Church’s Confession of Faith,” the Forum – in dialogue with the Mission and Discipleship Council– has been examining both theological and pastoral considerations around this subject. The Forum is aware that the current permissive legislation surrounding children and Communion allows for a diversity of practice across congregations in terms of whether and when children are permitted to take part in the Lord’s Supper. It is with this in mind that we here seek to explicate both the theological foundation for the normal ordering of the sacraments, as well as the important pastoral considerations that require to be prioritized when implementing this “normal order.”

According to Act V 2000, “The Lord’s Table is open to any baptised person who loves the Lord and responds in faith to the invitation, “Take, eat”.¹ This reflects what can be called the “normal order” of the sacraments, wherein baptism is to be considered a standard precondition for participation in Communion. It is worth noting the theological rationale for this ordering. As James B. Torrance has written in *Children at the Table* (produced to help the Church decide on questions around children and communion) “Christ baptises us into His Body that He might nourish us by faith.”² At baptism, we are welcomed into the universal Church; baptism is a “sign and seal of the covenant of grace,” a sign of our “ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins.”³ Baptism is not about personal piety or devotion, but “signifies the action and love of God in Christ”⁴; thus, baptising children is about “recognizing the nature of grace and childlike faith, without which none can enter the Kingdom.”⁵ It is thus in baptism that we recognize the inclusion of children in the Body of Christ. The Lord’s Supper is a calling and invitation for those *within* the Body of Christ to commemorate the sacrifice and work of Christ, to be fed by Him, and “to be a bond and pledge of their Communion with Him, and with each other, as members of His mystical body.”⁶ There is a clear theological logic and order to the sequencing of the sacraments.

When it comes to the question of actual admission to the Lord’s Supper, Church of Scotland law and practice allows for the discretion of Kirk Sessions. Hence, while Section 13 of Act V 2000 states that a “Kirk Session is obliged to test the response in faith of a baptised person before authorising admission to the Lord’s Table,”⁷ it also contains the following provision:

¹ Act V.12, Consolidating Act Anent The Sacraments

http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0003/1839/2000_act_05.pdf

² James B. Torrance, “Some Theological Grounds for Admitting Children to the Lord’s Table,” in *Children at the Table*, ed. by David G. Hamilton and Finlay A. J. Macdonald, (Edinburgh: The Church of Scotland, 1982), p.6

³ Westminster Confession of Faith, xxviii.1

⁴ Act V.3

⁵ Torrance, 6

⁶ Westminster Confession of Faith, xxix.1

⁷ Act V.13

“*Notwithstanding* the terms of Section 13...where a Kirk Session is satisfied that baptised children are being nurtured within the life and worship of the Church and love the Lord and respond in faith to the invitation, ‘take, eat’, it may admit such children to the Lord’s Table, after pastorally overseeing the response of faith of such children to see when it is right for them to come to the Lord’s Table.”⁸ The Forum would wish to emphasize the permissive nature of this legislation. That is, Kirk Sessions are *not* required to test the faith of children in order for them to participate in the Lord’s Supper, so long as they are assured that the pastoral care and education of such children are being attended to. This is not to be considered “indiscriminate celebration” of the Lord’s Supper; as James Torrance writes, a child’s 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?”⁹

The question here arises: What about unbaptised children (or adults)? Should they be permitted to participate in the Lord’s Supper? While the Forum would wish to emphasise once again that the normal order is for baptism to precede Communion, we also recognise the importance of pastoral considerations in such cases. There is real spiritual value in the act of seeking to participate in the Lord’s Supper, to be nourished by Christ – whether or not the person is baptised. To turn away one who seeks to be fed by Christ would be to do real damage to the one who seeks. It is with this in mind that the Forum agrees with James Torrance’s thoughts on this question:

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.¹⁰

In other words, the normal ordering of the sacraments should never be reversed or ignored, but this normal ordering need by no means mean that unbaptised persons should be turned away from the Table. Rather, such persons should be welcomed to the Lord’s Supper, and subsequently encouraged to seek baptism and further instruction in the life of the Church. It is hoped that such subsequent encouragement would not be seen as anomalous – for such instruction should already be a component of the life of the Church.

Indeed, this question regarding unbaptised children may present a real opportunity. Admitting unbaptised children to the Lord’s Supper should not be seen as a softening of theological standards, but rather as the appropriate theological and pastoral response to one who seeks to be nourished by Christ. This being said, such situations remind us of the importance of offering ongoing instruction and education for both children and adults. Nurturing young lives in the faith and practice of the Church, as well as offering opportunities to make professions of faith, should be considered a necessary component of congregational life. The

⁸ Act V.15 (Emphasis added)

⁹ Torrance, 6

¹⁰ Torrance, 6

development of creative, instructive, and grace-filled pathways for the spiritual development of children should be a key focus for the Church. When such pathways are available, the question of unbaptised children and the Lord's Supper becomes less seemingly problematic: the congregation can simultaneously affirm the unbaptised child's hunger for Christ, *and* subsequently extend an invitation to the child (and his or her family) to pursue instruction, participation in congregational life, and baptism.

Deliverance to General Assembly 2018

Reaffirm the Church's understanding that those who receive Communion be baptised, while recognising that church law allows the offering of Communion to an unbaptised person as part of the mission of the Church.