

# Communion Practices

at Lutheran Church of the Resurrection:

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In the Lutheran Church of the Resurrection newsletter for April 2005 I wrote an article... and this paper is what ensued. Questions about our Communion Practices and Policies were raised and I felt privileged to take on the task of describing and researching our Holy Communion practices and teach what our church teaches about the same. The following flows from the research and discussions and hopefully will help us all understand the Lord's Supper better, and affirm the mysterious gifts of grace which are given to us in the meal. In addition hopefully this paper will help us all review our own understandings of The Lord's Supper.

The invitation to the Lord's Supper is from Jesus Christ our Lord, the one who instituted the Lord's Supper first in Matthew chapter 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:15-20; and I Corinthians 11:23-25. Traditionally, all baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are invited and expected to participate in this community meal, communing with God and each other.

One source of guidance and information is a document entitled "The Use and the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament" which was adopted at the ELCA Churchwide Assembly in August 1997. Citing

the ELCA document, “The Use and the Means of Grace”, Principle 31 states, “At the table of our Lord Jesus Christ, God nourishes faith, forgives sins, and calls us to be witnesses to the Gospel.”

Principle 49, 49a, and 49b, “All baptized persons are welcomed to Communion... [when they are visiting in the congregations of this church.]”

Philosophically, and more to the point theologically, the invitation is for everyone, baptized or not, which may be seen as a departure from the tradition, even though the earliest church likely held Holy Communion for every family gathered. This could be surmised by Jesus’ welcoming children, and no evidence to support exclusion of young participants. Jesus’ table practices included eating with sinners, lepers, prostitutes, tax collectors, who were all welcomed regardless of previous commitments or baptismal rites; each of whom were considered unclean and unfit to eat with an orthodox Jew.

In addition, the following example of how this could benefit, or further Christ’s Church and the individual: Say a seeker, or a Buddhist, or an agnostic, or a former church goer was to be invited to the Lord’s Supper to experience the true presence of Jesus Christ. Would they not experience the Lord’s presence even without baptism? After receiving a welcoming hospitality, would they not then pursue questions about the Lord’s Supper, perhaps furthering their faith and answering any questions they may have about this mysterious rite? I hope that our hospitality at the Lord’s Supper would heal hurts from past church experiences, and perhaps emulate the Lord himself, who sat at table with all sorts of folks, the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Further, citing “The Use and Means of Grace”, Application 37G, “When an un-baptized person comes to the table seeking Christ’s presence and is inadvertently communed, neither that person nor the ministers of Communion need be ashamed. Rather, Christ’s gift of love and mercy to all is praised. That person is invited to learn the faith of the Church, be baptized, and thereafter faithfully receive Holy Communion.”

Further still, if our trust is in God, who grants us freedom and grace beyond our wildest imaginations, how could our rituals be tainted, or lessened by inviting someone who is very young or even not baptized?

Alternatively, what does the church have to lose, what’s at stake, if we open our communion table to everyone Christ has invited?

- We may lean in the direction that the Lord’s Supper is so reverent that we would not want to take a chance on letting someone who doesn’t fully understand be part of this table.
- We might worry that First Communion would fade out or at least hold less importance than it did for our generation or a previous generation, thus undercutting a traditional “rite of passage”. (Frankly, the church is fading in importance for current and future generations of the very young and adolescent already, so change seems needed in many ways.)
- We might fear that through our decisions or practices, the Lord’s Supper is somehow less reverent, less important, less meaningful to us.
- We might just not like change in church traditions which, from our childhood, have remained the same and change always makes us a little anxious.

The question of children receiving communion at a young age, even infants, is a matter to be settled for each child by mutual conversation and prayer between the Pastor, the parents and the child. When the Presider says “All are welcome” to the Lord’s Supper, on behalf of our Lord Jesus Christ it means “All” are welcome. It is not an elder’s place or the Pastor’s place to “check tickets at the door”, or size up the congregation as they approach the communion rail to determine if someone is worthy to receive Holy Communion, although there are traditions that do just that.

Citing “The Use and the Means of Grace”, in background paragraph 37B, congregations in the ELCA are communing infants even now. “Although *A Statement on Communion Practices* (1989) precluded the communion of infants, members and congregations have become aware of this practice in some congregations of this church, in historical studies of the early centuries of the Church, in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, and in broader ecumenical discussion.”

I have found the task of researching the Sacrament of Holy Communion to be an enriching experience, with vast amounts of reading available. It has also felt like writing a term paper, with research points to argue for “my” position, which is a “battle” mentality that I do not like to engage in; in a way of finding scripture that agrees with me, or finding in Luther’s writings a sound bite that will make a point for me. That form of arguing has been abused so regularly in the church, for example using Bible texts to make “my” point or build up my defenses, or affirm “my” social understanding that I regularly choose not to abuse my office or scripture or even tradition to make my point. I will trust in God to guide us and trust in the Grace of God to forgive when we

make mistakes. I believe that opening Holy Communion to all can only have positive effects for our ministry with, especially, but not limited to, children.

In summary, my calling to the office of Pastor is to teach, preach and distribute the sacraments rightly. In my understanding and faith, the Grace of God trumps the law, whether it seems mundane, such as food restriction laws, or monumental laws such as do not kill. In the Resurrection God even overcomes death. The grace of God can forgive the most outrageous sins and only God can read and know someone's heart. I think Luther once said something like, no one can believe for someone else and no one can die for someone else.

Further, my calling or charge as Pastor, following the April Church Council meeting, seemed to be to come up with a logical, sensible, reasonable, explanation for the grace of God... That is quite hard to do, if not impossible. It brings to mind the passage of Paul, "For Jews demand signs, and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block... foolishness..." (Paraphrased) The law we can do; don't do that, don't do this, check credentials etc. But grace is like the Holy Spirit that blows where it will. We know where it comes from but we do not know where it is going, or who it is seeking or who will be infected by it.

As for **logistics or choreography** at the Communion Table, we can make clear instructions for this by addressing the concerns raised at the Council meeting. A task force might want to make this statement of protocol but basically, we can give instructions about who receives, how they receive (hands crossed symbolizing the cross, held up), and whether they receive only

bread, or bread and wine, or bread and grape juice. Communion with one element versus two is sufficient to distribute the means of grace.

Concern was raised about communing some children while not communing others. Communing any child is the decision for the parents to discuss with their children. Regardless of what the Pastor does or does not do, in any situation at church for that matter, the heart of raising up faithful and faith-filled children is the promise that parents make at a child's baptism. "Pour your Holy Spirit upon (this child): the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, the spirit of joy in your presence." For example: If parents do not attend worship regularly the children will likely not either. If parents do not engage in prayer at home, then the children will likely not either. If the parents do not contribute to the church offering the children will likely not either. I would encourage this conversation at whatever level of understanding a child might have anyway. And then with conversation with your child, decide when you would like them to take communion, peer-pressure or not. If your child is pre-speech age, trust the Holy Spirit to engage the child in the Lord's Supper, much the way we do with the sacrament of infant baptism.

Regarding these concerns it seems to me that if we could create such a "buzz" about receiving the Grace of God through the sacrament of Holy Communion that little children talk about it afterwards with whomever will listen; that seems like a fantastic benefit. How could we possibly "overspend" the grace that was first given to us? As Jesus has said, we received without payment, give without payment.

Peace and Potatoes,  
Pastor Garrett Struessel

## Bible Notes simply for reference:

Text passages describing who Jesus ate with regularly.

### [Mt 9:10](#) - [Show Context](#)

And as he sat at dinner in the house, many **tax** collectors and **sinners** came and were sitting with him and his disciples.

### [Mt 9:11](#) - [Show Context](#)

When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with **tax** collectors and **sinners**?"

### [Mt 11:19](#) - [Show Context](#)

the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of **tax** collectors and **sinners**!" Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds."

### [Lu 5:30](#) - [Show Context](#)

The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with **tax** collectors and **sinners**?"

### [Lu 7:34](#) - [Show Context](#)

the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of **tax** collectors and **sinners**!"

### [Lu 15:1](#) - [Show Context](#)

Now all the **tax** collectors and **sinners** were coming near to listen to him.

**Mt 6:11** Give us this day our daily bread.

**Mt 7:7-10** "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. **8** For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. **9** Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? **10** Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake?"

**Mt 11:25-26** At that time Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; **26** yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.

Mt 18:1-5 **1** At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" **2** He called a child, whom he put among them, **3** and said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. **4** Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. **5** Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

**Mt 19:13-15** Then little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them; **14** but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." **15** And he laid his hands on them and went on his way. (Added 8/06)