

CHILDREN AND COMMUNION



It was not too many years ago in the history of our denomination that it would have been very unlikely to see the words "children" and "communion" together, for in the minds of many people, these were - and still are - two things that do not belong together. The sacrament of Holy Communion is for older individuals, for those who fully understand the nature of the sacrament, for those who have completed a designated course of study, for those who are able to verbalize in concrete terms their faith and commitment to Jesus Christ and the Church. Is this the way it should be?

One beautiful summer day as my four year-old son and I were traveling home after having spent the afternoon taking communion to some of shut-ins of our congregation, we found ourselves involved in what turned out to be a theological discussion. I knew that my son had been very curious and attentive as I had gone through the process of sharing communion with these older persons, so I very casually asked him, "Do you know what communion is all about?" "Sure," he said, "It's like when Jesus and his friends had supper together. You said the bread and juice are Jesus' body and blood, right Mom?"

I do not think my son's response is unusual, nor do I think that it would cause us to change suddenly our church policies about to whom communion is offered, but it does raise some serious questions about age and understanding as criteria for determining one's "right" to participate. Scripture is silent with regard to age of communicants and with regard to a course of study which one must complete before being given the privilege to commune. It is not silent, however, about the fact that the sacrament must not be abused or taken lightly.¹ We are also reminded that the "first communion" was experienced in the context of a meal (the Last Supper) and was offered to the entire family present there, even though within a matter of hours one of those family members would deny Christ three times and another would betray him.

To a large extent, our practices concerning communion have been based on tradition - good, solid tradition which has been aimed at preventing abuse of the sacrament. However, when "the way we have always done it" prevents us from considering new possibilities and keeps us from growing in our faith, then perhaps we need to re-evaluate our traditions and, with God's guidance and direction, seek to make changes. Furthermore, if we truly mean what we say in the sacrament of baptism when we "praise God for calling this child into the company of Christ's people and accept him/her with joy"² then we need also to take seriously the valid participation of children in the life and sacraments of the Church.

To be sure, it is very difficult to be totally objective about the Lord's Supper, for as a sacrament it involves God touching our lives with love and grace in ways that defy explanation. The sacrament is experiential; it is a gift to those believers who come openly, faithfully, and with awe and expectation. So we are challenged as adults - who have perhaps forgotten these vital elements of communion and would do well to learn from our children - to examine anew our practices surrounding this sacrament, and with the direction of God's Holy Spirit and the Church of Jesus Christ, move in those ways that will bring us closer to the God in whom we believe and the faith we confess.

Sue Bertolette

¹ I Corinthians 11:27-32

² The Hymnal of the United Church of Christ, , p. 31

Affirming our Faith Series

Reformed-Evangelical-Catholic
Published by the Committee on Theology
Pennsylvania Southeast Conference
United Church of Christ

