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Is “Infant Communion” Un-Lutheran and Anti-Confessional?

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Please note that abbreviations for the Lutheran Confessions in this essay are:

BC - Book of Concord

ApCr - Apostles' Creed

NC - Nicene Creed

AthCr - Athanasian Creed

AC - Augsburg Confession

Apol - Apology of the Augsburg Confession

SA - Smalcald Articles

Tr - Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope

SC - Small Catechism

LC - Large Catechism

FC - Formula of Concord

Ep - Epitome

SD - Solid Declaration

References will be cited by confession article, section, and page in the Tappert edition.

Recent discussion in North American Lutheranism has raised several important questions about the theology underlying the practice of communing baptized infants.¹ Some charge that the practice is un-Lutheran because it violates the confessional requirement for faith in participation in the sacraments. It seems to me that this charge makes the meaning of “faith” in Lutheran theology the primary issue in discussing “communion of all the baptized”. Can a baptized infant rightly use the sacrament by receiving it in faith? Because of that question this essay will focus primarily on the issue of the meaning of “faith” by first looking at the Augsburg Confession supplemented from other parts of BC and other writings of Luther² and Melancthon.

BC contains at least two different types of uses of the word “faith”. The first of these appears already on the title page of the 1580 edition: “CONCORDIA / Christian, Reiterated, and Unanimous Confession / of the Doctrine and Faith of the undersigned...”³ Given that this title applies to a book containing doctrinal content and that the word “faith” is parallel to the word “doctrine” here, it appears that “faith” in this instance refers to the theological content of the confession of the Evangelical estates. In the same way many writers speak of the “faith of the church” in referring to the content of the church’s belief; one can also speak of “articles of faith”. The preface of BC seems to use the word “faith” exclusively in this way.⁴

That this usage is not original with the compilers of BC is shown by the AthCr⁵ and the preface to AC.⁶ Both use “faith” to refer to doctrinal content. One could produce any number of quotations from early and medieval theologians and conciliar decrees to demonstrate the same point.

We see a different use of the word when we arrive at the doctrinal articles of AC. AC IV says,

It is also taught among us that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ’s sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness, as Paul says....⁷

AC V then goes on to say:

To obtain such faith God instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided the Gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith, when and where he pleases, in those who hear the Gospel. And the Gospel teaches that we have a gracious God, not by our own merits but by the merit of Christ, when we believe this.⁸

AC IV and V seem to indicate several things about faith. First, we are forgiven and become righteous before God by grace. “Grace” indicates a gift and is usually understood in Lutheran theology to refer to an unconditional promise or love and acceptance with no strings attached. Grace is not in Lutheran theology understood as a power (as in Augustine⁹) or as a substance (as in Medieval theology) but as a relationship. Given that “faith” is subordinate to “grace” in AC IV,

it would seem that faith in this sense should always be understood within the context of a relationship of unconditional promise. This is the famous Reformation *sola gratia*.

Second, forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God are received for Christ's sake. Our justification is not dependent in any way on "our own merits, words, or satisfactions", but on the person and work of Jesus Christ. This is the principle *solus Christus*. It is the crucified and resurrected Jesus who is responsible for our salvation, not we ourselves. "Faith", then, cannot be understood in any way that detracts from the centrality of Christ or from the fact of "Christ alone". Faith does not add to the work of Christ.

What then is the role of faith? Our third point is that AC IV says, "through faith". This appears to indicate that "grace" is the "cause" of our justification while "faith" is the "instrument". *Sola gratia* and *solus Christus* are always prior to *sola fide*. The conclusion one could draw from AC IV is that the Gospel will be stated, "Because God is gracious in Christ, therefore you have faith and are justified," not "If you have faith, then God will be gracious in Christ and you will be justified."¹⁰ When the latter statement is analyzed one can see that it is actually Law rather than Gospel, for it places preconditions on God's grace in Christ. AC IV makes it quite clear that faith cannot be understood as a precondition for grace, for then faith would simply be another form of "our own merits..." AC V makes it clear that faith cannot be understood as a kind of preparation for the receipt of the Holy Spirit who comes through the Gospel.

A fourth point is brought out by AC V: faith is worked by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel expressed in Word and sacraments. This statement confirms what has been said above. Faith is not our work but the Spirit's work. Faith does not come through our preparations, but through the Gospel heard in Word and sacraments. The Latin version of AC V makes this quite clear: "For through the Word and the sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given, and the Holy Spirit produces faith, where and when it pleases God, in those who hear the Gospel."¹¹ Again it is affirmed that "It is not on account of our own merits but on account of Christ that God justifies those who believe..."¹² Thus belief cannot

be understood as that which merits the gift of the Holy Spirit, but as that which follows from the gift of the Holy Spirit.

This last point may clear up a possible confusion introduced by the wording of AC IV. There the phrase “this faith” in the last sentence might refer to belief “that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us.”¹³ This could be understood to say that such belief is a precondition which must be fulfilled prior to one’s receipt of God’s grace and the Holy Spirit. Certainly some Protestants understand justification in this way. AC V excludes such an understanding by stating that belief is the result of the gift of the Spirit, not a preparation for receiving the Spirit. Belief is the result of faith, which is worked by the Spirit through the Gospel.

It should also be noted that, according to AC V in the Latin, the Gospel, which is the means of the Spirit’s work, is communicated through both Word and sacraments. Certainly “Word” and “Gospel” are closely aligned concepts in AC, and here the German has “Gospel” where the Latin has “Word”. The context of this article makes it clear that Lutheran theology will not allow a separation between Word and sacraments. Word and sacraments are both communication of the Gospel, and this defines their fundamental character.

AC VI reminds us that “this faith is bound to bring forth good fruits and that it is necessary to do the good words commanded by God.”¹⁴ This would indicate that there is something more to faith than a human work, even the work of belief. Luther expresses this in his preface to Romans:

Faith, however, is a divine work in us which changes us and makes us to be born anew of God, John 1 [:12–13]. It kills the old Adam and makes us altogether different people], in heart and spirit and mind and powers; and it brings with it the Holy Spirit. O it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly.¹⁵

Again it seems that faith cannot be equated with the human work of belief, but is perhaps better understood as a miracle of God worked in the core of a person’s being. It would also seem rather difficult at this point to limit Luther’s or AC’s understanding of faith to the cognitive dimension of human existence.

AC VI is closely related to AC XX, where the question of good works is discussed in more detail. AC XX offers a more

specific definition of faith. It says that faith is not mere belief in "the history of Christ's suffering and his resurrection from the dead..." Rather, by "faith" the Evangelical confessors mean "such faith as believes that we receive grace and forgiveness of sins through Christ."¹⁶ In the next paragraph the German version cites Hebrews 11 to "make it clear that faith is not merely a knowledge of historical events, but is a confidence in God and in the fulfillment of his promises." Augustine is also cited to show that "we should understand the word 'faith' in the Scriptures to mean confidence in God, [and] assurance that God is gracious to us..."¹⁷

The definition offered in AC XX is also paralleled by Luther's preface to Romans:

Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that the believer would stake his life on it a thousand times. This knowledge of and confidence in God's grace makes [people] glad and bold and happy in dealing with God and with all creatures. And this is the work which the Holy Spirit performs in faith.¹⁸

Once again Luther confirms that faith, even when defined as knowledge and confidence, is to be understood as the work of the Holy Spirit, not the work of the Christian. Though we might refer to disciples of Jesus Christ as "believers", faith is not the human work of belief, nor is it a human originated act of trust and confidence. That faith which is the "instrument" of justification is always a work of the Holy Spirit through the Gospel communicated in Word and sacraments.

The purpose of the analysis to this point is to develop a preliminary sense of what "faith" might mean when we come to AC XIII on the use of the sacraments. AC XIII states that the sacraments are given "for the purpose of awakening and strengthening our faith." It also states that the sacraments "require faith" and are properly used "when they are received in faith and for the purpose of strengthening faith."¹⁹

It would seem that faith here does not refer to the content of Christian teaching, but to the instrument of justification. Thus AC XIII makes no requirement of an intellectual understanding of Christian doctrine, but rather requires that the participant in the sacraments be in a relationship with God in Christ which is characterized by the words "grace" and "faith".²⁰ The faith which is awakened, strengthened, and required is that work of the Holy Spirit in those who hear the Gospel communicated

in Word and sacraments which brings the forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God. This is not to be understood as being accomplished by the doing of the external act; that is, the Spirit does not work *ex opere operato*.²¹

If the Spirit does not work through the sacraments *ex opere operato*, how then does the Spirit work? On one level, the Lutheran condemnation of an *ex opere operato* understanding of the sacraments is simply saying that God is God and cannot be manipulated by any human works, in this case cultic works. On another level the concept of *ex opere operato* is linked to the medieval understanding of grace as substance or power, the same idea that led to confusion over other doctrines such as predestination. If, with Luther, one understands grace relationally, then the problems are much less severe. The sacraments do not confer a power or infuse a substance *ex opere operato*, but inaugurate and sustain a relationship. This relationship is called "grace" when viewed from God's perspective and "faith" when viewed from the human perspective. It is quite proper to say that the Holy Spirit creates and sustains faith through the sacraments, and not thereby intend *ex opere operato*, because the work of the Spirit is to initiate and nurture the grace-faith relationship of unconditional promise and ultimate commitment.

In this light, to say that the sacraments "require faith" cannot be understood to mean that human works of cognition or belief, or even some human effort at trust or confidence, is a precondition for participation in the sacraments. Leif Grane, in his commentary on AC XIII, reminds us that this article rejects both parts of the *opus operatum* formula, which says that the sacraments work by the external act if we have the proper disposition. Grane says:

One cannot distinguish the Roman and the Lutheran sacramental teachings from each other by saying that, while the Roman teaching merely requires a purely negative disposition, that one not "bar the door," the Lutheran teaching requires much more, namely a true faith. In Roman teaching the primary issue is indeed a proper disposition; when that is present, the sacrament works *ex opere operato*. The Lutheran demand for *fides specialis*, however, is not a demand for a disposition—perhaps a better or finer one. If that were the case, one could as well have preserved the expression *ex opere operato*, simply explaining *what* is required to make the sacrament into a *signum efficax*.²²

If this is correct, then AC XIII should not be understood to be making faith a precondition for participating in the sacraments, but to be affirming that the sacraments can only be true sacraments when they are understood as Gospel communication, that is as communication of the promise of God in which we encounter God personally as the Holy Spirit works “in, with, and under” Word and sacraments. The problem with the idea that the sacraments work “automatically” if one has the proper disposition is that it allows people to participate in the sacraments without ever encountering God face-to-face. AC XIII teaches that the sacraments are the work of the Holy Spirit establishing and nurturing that relationship with God in Christ which is characterized by the words “grace” and “faith”. If this is true, it seems difficult to maintain that the practice of communing baptized infants is necessarily *ex opere operato*. In fact, requiring cognitive understanding of Christian doctrine or an act of belief prior to admission to the Eucharist appears more likely to reflect an *ex opere operato* understanding of the sacraments.

Since some opponents of “communion of all the baptized” find the requirement of faith as stated in AC XIII to be crucial to worthy participation in Holy Communion and find the practice of communing baptized infants to be defective on this ground, it is important to apply the findings of this study to that specific question. In order to deal with that question we shall first look again at AC XIII supplemented by Apol XIII and Melancthon’s *Loci*, and then at Luther’s statements on the subject.

To begin with, AC XIII does not limit itself to the Eucharist but speaks of “the sacraments”. For this reason it seems that we ought not separate the discussion of faith in one sacrament from faith in all sacraments. Nowhere does AC state or even imply that the connection of faith with the Supper is somehow different from the connection of faith with Baptism. In fact, given the arrangement of AC IX–XIII—which is also followed by SC—we should probably be including Confession and Absolution in a discussion of faith and the sacraments in AC. Be that as it may, AC speaks of faith and the sacraments in a unitary way, not dividing the sacraments from one another.

Apol XIII reminds us that we should neither separate the sacraments from one another in this discussion, nor separate the Word from the sacraments:

When we are baptized, when we eat the Lord's body, when we are absolved, our hearts should firmly believe that God really forgives us for Christ's sake. Through the Word and the rite God simultaneously moves the heart to believe and to take hold of faith, as Paul says (Rom 10:17), "Faith comes from what is heard." As the Word enters through the ears to strike the heart, so the rite itself enters through the eyes to move the heart. The Word and the rite have the same effect, as Augustine said so well when he called the sacrament "the visible Word," for the rite is received by the eyes and is a sort of picture of the Word, signifying the same thing as the Word. Therefore both have the same effect.²³

Whatever we say, then, about faith and the Eucharist should be consistent with what we say about faith and Baptism, and faith and the Word.

Apol XIII also comments on the question of faith and the sacraments:

It is much more necessary to know how to use the sacraments [than to know their number]. Here we condemn the whole crowd of scholastic doctors who teach that unless there is some obstacle, the sacraments confer grace *ex opere operato*, without a good disposition in the one using them. [We ought not]... believe that we are justified by a ceremony without a good disposition in our heart, that is without faith.... Thus we teach that in using the sacraments there must be a faith which believes these promises and accepts that which is promised and offered in the sacrament. The reason for this is clear and well founded. A promise is useless unless faith accepts it. The sacraments are signs of the promises. When they are used, therefore, there must be faith, so that anyone who uses the Lord's Supper uses it this way. Because this is a sacrament of the New Testament, as Christ clearly says (I Cor. 11:25), the communicant should be certain that the free forgiveness of sins, promised in the New Testament, is being offered to him. He should accept this by faith, comfort his troubled conscience, and believe that the testimonies are not false but as certain as though God, by a new miracle, promised his will to forgive. For that matter, what good would such miracles or promises do an unbeliever? Here we are talking about personal faith, which accepts the promise as a present reality and believes that the forgiveness of sins is actually being offered....²⁴

The statements of Apol XIII raise some questions. First of all, Melanchthon does here seem to replace "not bar the door" with a good disposition of the heart, thus making faith a precondition for receiving the sacraments. Second, Melanchthon, part way through the paragraph, begins to speak only of the

Supper and not of all sacraments. Based on what we have seen from AC, and even earlier in this same article, we would not expect either of these moves.

We should not assume, however, on the basis of these statements that Melanchthon intends to regard faith as something which we can produce. This is made quite clear in the 1555 German edition of his *Loci Communes*:

When one says, "*Through faith* we have forgiveness of sins, and are justified," this does not mean that we have forgiveness of sins for the sake of this work which is called *faith*; but *for the sake of the Lord Christ* on whose obedience and merit the reliance is based. Faith is the means by which we behold the Lord Christ and by which we apply and appropriate his merit to ourselves.

To prevent erroneous interpretation, which is common in our churches, when one says, "Through faith we have forgiveness and are justified, that is, pleasing to God," it should be understood correlatively, that is, for the sake of the Lord Christ, not that the work, namely faith, is the merit.

And the power to revitalize, pacify, and comfort the heart is not the power of faith, but of Christ himself, who through faith works, comforts, and gives his Holy Spirit in the heart. But Christ wants to work through the gospel and faith, and not otherwise.²⁵

This passage returns us to the expression of AC and Luther's preface to Romans which maintains that faith is not our work of belief, but is the work of the Spirit in us through the Gospel communicated in Word and sacraments. The other question is whether Melanchthon in Apol intends to separate faith in Baptism from faith in the Lord's Supper. Several pieces of evidence lead to the conclusion that such is not his intent. First, Melanchthon does not in the first or last edition of his *Loci* separate the two in regard to faith, but discusses the question of faith under the heading of the sacraments in general.²⁶ Second, Melanchthon was quite aware of Luther's *Babylonian Captivity of the Church* in which the Reformer wrote, "For unless faith is present or is conferred in baptism, baptism will profit us nothing; indeed it will become a hindrance to us, not only at the moment it is received, but throughout the rest of our lives."²⁷

The conclusions reached by this survey are threefold. First, when AC XIII says that the sacraments "require faith", it does not mean that a cognitive act of belief is to be established as a precondition for participation in the sacraments. Second,

the requirement of faith applies equally to both sacraments, not to Holy Communion alone or uniquely. Third, faith is to be understood not as our own work, but as the work of the Holy Spirit²⁸ through the Gospel communicated in Word and sacraments. Our task now is to apply these conclusions to the question of "infant communion".

First of all, it would be helpful for those who oppose communing of baptized infants to explain what they mean when they say that "personal faith" (*fides specialis*?) is a requirement for receiving the Eucharist. Do they intend to make the act of belief a prerequisite for participation in the Lord's Supper? If so, then they are at variance with AC on the question and are presenting only a higher form of the Medieval *ex opere operato* understanding and not a Lutheran understanding of the sacraments. If not, then it seems that they should speak with more precision so as to avoid the appearance of Semi-Pelagianism.

Secondly, can an infant meet the "requirement" of faith for participation in the sacraments as laid out in AC XIII? The answer to this question is obviously yes, since Lutheran theology has always staunchly defended admitting infants to Baptism. In fact, in AC the affirmation of infant Baptism in AC IX comes prior to the requirement of faith in AC XIII. How then can an infant have faith? For assistance in this question it might be helpful to examine how Luther and Melanchthon connect faith to infant Baptism.

Luther's earliest statements about faith and Baptism are summarized in his 1519 pastoral treatise, "The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism". There he says that faith is the most necessary aspect, for it holds fast to Baptism against the terrors of conscience. There is no mention of infants.²⁹ Luther does deal with the problem in *Babylonian Captivity*:

In contradiction to what has been said, some might cite the *baptism of infants* who do not comprehend the promise of God and cannot have the faith of baptism; so that therefore either faith is not necessary or else infant baptism is without effect. Here I say what all say: Infants are aided by the faith of others, namely, those who bring them for baptism. For the Word of God is powerful enough, when uttered, to change even a godless heart, which is no less unresponsive and helpless than any infant.³⁰

Although Luther adopts the traditional argument, he already seems inclined to move beyond it to emphasize the creative activity of the Word of God.

In later writings and sermons the emphasis falls entirely on the action of the Word; the faith of the parents and sponsors is not prominent. For example, Luther addresses the issue in his 1528 series of sermons on the catechism which are related to LC:

Thirdly, that we may know the person who should be baptized: Who should receive baptism? The one who believes is the person to whom the blessed, divine water is to be imparted. If you believe that through this water you will be saved, it becomes a fact. The first point, therefore, is that baptism is water connected with God's Word. The second is the fruit, and the third is that the person who believes is the one who is worthy of baptism....

Here we meet the question whether children who are baptized believe? He who is simple, let him dismiss these questions and refer them to me or answer this way: I know that infant baptism pleases God; I know that I was baptized as a child; I know that I have the Holy Spirit, for this I have the interpretation of the Scriptures themselves....

Note well, therefore that baptism is water with the Word of God, not water and my faith. My faith does not make the baptism but rather receives the baptism, no matter whether the person being baptized believes or not; for baptism is not dependent on my faith but upon God's Word...Likewise, if I administer the sacrament to someone who cherishes anger or the like, he nevertheless receives the true body. Therefore it is false to say that infants do not believe and therefore should not be baptized. You have already heard that they do believe, because the fruits follow, namely the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The sacrament [of the Lord's Supper] does not rest upon faith but upon the Word of God, who instituted it, and so it is with baptism also....

...I am a learned man and a preacher and I go to the sacrament in the faith of others and in my own faith. Nevertheless, I don't stand on that, I stand on: "Take; this is my body." Upon these words I go, and I know that Christ invites me, for he said, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest"; and this will not deceive me. Thus I certainly have the sacrament. Accordingly, I apply this to baptism and pray that faith may be given to [the child]. But I do not baptise it upon its faith or someone else's faith, but upon God's Word and command. In my faith I may lie, but he who instituted baptism cannot lie.³¹

This is quite a remarkable passage. Not only does Luther say that he does not require faith of the infant receiving Baptism, but he bases this on the Eucharist! In neither sacrament are we to look to the faith of the recipient, but to the Word of

God. The sacrament is not dependent on our faith, but upon the command and promise of God. If God gives faith by the Holy Spirit, we have faith; if God does not give faith, we do not have it.³² In the meantime we are to obey the command and trust the promise.

From this sermon and from LC, which is closely connected with it, it seems that Luther assumes that the faith which Baptism requires is the result of the creative activity of the Word. Growth in faith and belief come after the sacrament as the child is nurtured and educated in the church. Luther would remind us that Baptism is not our work but God's. This is why faith is required, because God's works "demand faith". "... Baptism is not a work which we do but is a treasure which God gives and faith grasps..."³³

The question is whether these statements about faith and infant Baptism can be applied also to infant communion. To begin with, neither AC X nor AC XIII deal with the question of who is to be admitted to the sacrament of the altar. AC XIII speaks to the totality of the church's celebration of the sacraments, not to the question of the admission of individuals, and holds that the sacraments must be celebrated so that they are Gospel communication and not mere religious rituals. The task of the church is to communicate the Gospel to all creation, not to provide rites of passage which reinforce the cultural status quo. This review has already sufficiently established that infants can be and are part of the sort of faith spoken of in AC XIII.

The question still remains whether baptized infants can qualify as worthy communicants under definitions given in BC. We can attempt to answer this in several ways. First, do the definitions of unworthy communicants apply to baptized infants? LC defines unworthy communicants as "the person who desires no grace and absolution and has no intention to amend his life" and "those who despise the sacrament and lead unchristian lives."³⁴ FC Ep states: "We believe, teach, and confess that there is only one kind of unworthy guest, namely, those who do not believe." FC Ep also refers to unbelievers who are not converted and who do not repent as unworthy communicants.³⁵ FC SD also lists those who receive without true repentance,³⁶ those in Corinth "who were eating idol-sacrifices and participating in pagan devil-worship,"³⁷ and

“godless Epicureans and scoffers at the Word of God”³⁸ as unworthy recipients. Can any of these definitions be applied to baptized infants? To do so would seem to create extreme difficulties for a Lutheran theology of Baptism and to deny the Gospel character of Baptism. It seems safe to conclude that, according to the teachings of BC, baptized infants would not fall under the category “unworthy” and therefore would not receive Christ’s body and blood to their judgement.

Does this mean that we can conclude that, since baptized infants are not “unworthy”, they are “worthy” communicants? Not necessarily; the idea must be tested against the actual teaching of BC as it defines a worthy communicant. The most succinct definitions are in FC VII. FC Ep VII says:

9. We believe, teach and confess that no genuine believer, no matter how weak he may be, as long as he retains a living faith, will receive the Holy Supper to his condemnation, for Christ instituted this Supper particularly for Christians who are weak in faith but repentant, to comfort them and to strengthen their weak faith.

10. We believe, teach and confess that the entire worthiness of the guests at this heavenly feast is and consists solely and alone in the most holy obedience and complete merit of Christ, which we make our own through genuine faith and of which we are assured through the sacrament. Worthiness consists not at all in our own virtues or in our internal and external preparations.³⁹

FC Ep also expressly condemns two teachings on this matter:

17. That the worthiness of the guests at this heavenly meal does not consist only in true faith in Christ, but also depends on people’s outward preparation.

That genuine believers, who have a genuine and living faith in Christ, can also receive this sacrament to their condemnation because they are still imperfect in their external behavior.⁴⁰

FC SD reinforces these definitions:

True and worthy communicants, on the other hand, are those timid, perturbed Christians, weak in faith, who are heartily terrified because of their many and great sins, who consider themselves unworthy of this noble treasure and the benefits of Christ because of their great impurity, and who perceive their weakness in faith, deplore it, and heartily wish that they might serve God with a stronger and more cheerful faith and a purer obedience. This most venerable sacrament was instituted and ordained primarily for communicants like this...⁴¹

Do baptized infants qualify under this definition of worthiness? Again, that will depend on one's theology of Baptism. Is Baptism a communication of the Gospel in, with, and under which the Holy Spirit works faith in the infant disciple, as AC says and Lutheran theology has always taught? If so, it would seem that there is a real possibility that a baptized infant could be a worthy communicant. So, it appears that within the boundaries of BC baptized infants cannot be classified as unworthy communicants and could be classified as worthy guests.

Finally we must ask whether BC places any other insurmountable obstacles to admitting baptized infants to the Lord's Supper. Some opponents of communing baptized infants suggest that the ability to articulate a cognitive understanding of the Christian faith—in the sense of doctrinal content—especially as regards Holy Communion itself, is required prior to admission to the sacrament. While it would seem from the material above on faith and the sacraments that this is not appropriate, passages from BC are often produced to support this position. We turn now to an examination of some of these passages.

One such is a portion of LC V, "The Sacrament of the Altar":

As we treated Holy Baptism under three headings, so we must deal with the second sacrament in the same way, stating what it is, what its benefits are, and who is to receive it. All these are established from the words by which Christ instituted it. So everyone who wishes to be a Christian and go to the sacrament should be familiar with them. For we do not intend to admit to the sacrament and administer it to those who do not know what they seek or why they come.⁴²

In light of other material in BC, one might ask whether the requirement of knowledge here applies to baptized infants, or only to adults who choose to remain ignorant.

Other popular quotations come from the preface to SC and the preface to LC:

If any refuse to receive your instruction, tell them that they deny Christ and are no Christians. They should not be admitted to the sacrament, be accepted as sponsors in Baptism, or be allowed to participate in any Christian privileges. On the contrary, they should be turned over to the pope and his officials, and even to the

devil himself. In addition, parents and employers should refuse to furnish them with food and drink and should notify them that the prince is disposed to banish such rude people from his land.⁴³

This sermon has been undertaken for the instruction of children and uneducated people. Hence from ancient times it has been called, in Greek, a "catechism"—that is, instruction for children. Its contents represent the minimum of knowledge required of a Christian. Whoever does not possess it should not be reckoned among Christians nor admitted to a sacrament, just as a craftsman who does not know the rules and practices of his craft is rejected and considered incompetent.⁴⁴

It should be obvious from the context that these paragraphs do not apply to baptized infants, unless we are to believe that Luther considered baptized infants as "no Christians" who should be denied food, turned over to the devil, and banished from the community.

This is obviously not the case, so we are brought to the conclusion that these citations do not apply to the case at hand. Nonetheless, it is equally obvious that BC does not intend to admit to the sacrament those adults who willfully remain ignorant of Christian teaching. Luther is speaking here of church discipline and its connection to Christian education. Thus, the practice of communing baptized infants should be connected to a sense of the integrity of the Lord's table and a complete congregational program of opportunities for the instruction of children and adults. In this light adult education is especially important.

There is one final point to be considered, and that is the question whether BC requires self-examination, confession, and absolution prior to receiving the Eucharist. While one might conclude from material cited above that making such a requirement would be foreign to the spirit of the definitions of worthy and unworthy guests, opponents of communing baptized infants may be on solid ground here.

For example the Latin of AC XXIV, though not the German, says:

The people are accustomed to receive the sacrament together, in so far as they are fit to do so. This likewise increases the reverence and devotion of public worship, for none are admitted unless they are first heard and examined. The people are admonished concerning the value and use of the sacrament and the great consolation it offers to anxious consciences, that they may learn to believe in God and ask for and expect whatever is good from God.⁴⁵

With these words Melanchthon defends the Evangelicals from the charges of Eck and others that they had abolished the mass and describes the actual situation in the Evangelical territories.

A similar point is made in AC XXV:

Confession has not been abolished by the preachers on our side. The custom has been retained among us of not administering the sacrament to those who have not previously been examined and absolved. At the same time the people are carefully instructed concerning the consolation of the Word of absolution so that they may esteem absolution as a great and precious thing.⁴⁶

The point is made again in Apol XV and XXIV:

Among our opponents, unwilling celebrants and hirelings perform Mass, and they often do so only for the money. When they chant the Psalms, it is not to learn or pray but for the sake of the rite, as if this work were an act of worship or at least worth some reward. Every Lord's Day many in our circles use the Lord's Supper, but only after they have been instructed, examined, and absolved. The children chant the Psalms in order to learn; the people sing, too, in order to learn or to worship.⁴⁷

To begin with, we must repeat the prefatory statement that we do not abolish the Mass but religiously keep and defend it. In our churches Mass is celebrated every Sunday and on other festivals, when the sacrament is offered to those who wish for it after they have been examined and absolved. We keep traditional liturgical forms, such as the order of the lessons, prayers, vestments, etc.⁴⁸

The question whether these passages from AC and Apol intend to prescribe ("This you must do.") or describe ("This is what we currently do.") is raised by their context and wording. Is Melanchthon intending to defend the Evangelicals by describing what happens on a Sunday in Wittenberg, or is he setting forth what is to become the true Lutheran way? In the 1555 edition of the *Loci* he says:

St. Paul speaks of preparation and worthiness when he says, "Each one is to examine himself." Because such examination is part of the participation, it is not the custom to bring young children who are not yet instructed in God's word.⁴⁹

So, young children were not communed in Wittenberg because of the need for self-examination, but again Melanchthon uses the ambiguous word "custom". Also there is a change from AC and Apol, where it appears that the pastor is the one who examines. It may be that what we see here is the manner

in which the Lutherans preserved private Confession and Absolution rather than a requirement for first admission to the Eucharist.

In "The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods", "Babylonian Captivity", SC, and LC Luther makes no reference to a requirement for examination. Also the admonition to the sacrament in the German Mass does not mention examination.⁵⁰ On the other hand, the *Formula Missae* says:

Here one should follow the same usage as with baptism, namely, that the bishop be informed of those who want to commune. They should request in person to receive the Lord's Supper so that he may be able to know both their names and manner of life. And let him not admit the applicants unless they can give a reason for their faith and can answer questions about what the Lord's Supper is, what its benefits are, and what they expect to derive from it. In other words, they should be able to repeat the Words of Institution from memory and to explain that they are coming because they are troubled by the consciousness of their sin, the fear of death, or some other evil, such as temptation of the flesh, the world, or the devil, and now hunger and thirst to receive the word and sign of grace and salvation from the Lord himself through the ministry of the bishop, so they may be consoled and comforted....

But I think it enough for the applicants for communion to be examined or explored once a year. Indeed, a man may be so understanding that he needs to be questioned only once in his lifetime or not at all. For, by this practice, we want to guard lest the worthy and unworthy alike rush to the Lord's Supper.... Those, therefore, who are not able to answer in the manner described above should be completely excluded and banished from the communion of the Supper, since they are without the wedding garment.⁵¹

Thus it would appear that persons were examined prior to receiving the Lord's Supper (on each occasion, not just the first time) and that pastoral discretion was used in Wittenberg in the matter of examination.

The question still exists whether these statements about either pastoral examination or self examination exclude baptized infants from the Lord's Supper. Clearly, in Melanchthon's mind they did. Must we follow Melanchthon and custom, or do we have the freedom to change the custom and admit baptized infants to the sacrament? In interpreting the passage from *Formula Missae*, the question seems to be whether the strictures there are intended to be directed against baptized

infants. Luther seems to be speaking about adults who were baptized but who have remained ignorant of Christian teaching about the Eucharist and its benefits. Are baptized infants who are not yet able to be instructed included in the same category? The text does not answer the question. At a minimum, it seems that, if we do admit baptized infants to Communion and also insist on following the practice of the church of Wittenberg, there should be a connection between continued participation in Christian education and continued participation in the Supper—and this should apply to adults as well.

From the evidence produced here, it appears that opponents of communing baptized infants have no justification for calling the practice “un-Lutheran” or “anti-confessional”. Such charges fail to understand the confessional meaning of “faith” and open Lutheranism to the influence of neo-Evangelical semi-Pelagianism. The material in BC and in the writings of Luther and Melanchthon does not lend itself to the accusation that persons who advocate communing baptized infants are heretics. Instead, it appears that the opponents should be questioned about their commitment to *sola gratia* and *solus Christus*. The Lutheran confessions clearly teach that God’s grace in Christ is unconditional. To maintain that an act of the human mind or the human will is “faith” and that such an act is a prerequisite for receiving the Lord’s body and blood certainly violates the spirit of BC and, one might argue, probably even the letter.

Nonetheless, those who advocate the practice should recognize that communing all the baptized with no age restriction is a significant change from previous Lutheran practice and custom. Even though the admission of baptized infants to the Eucharist is legitimate theologically, it is a major change in something that is at the heart of Lutheran practice and piety and ought not be instituted without further study of the matter by the church. Study in congregations who adopt the practice needs to be in depth and pastorally sensitive to the tradition of the church and the needs of the people. In this study the role of instruction and Confession and Absolution in the Lord’s Supper will need to receive especially careful attention.

Notes

- ¹ For a survey of the issue, cf. J. Robert Jacobson, *Besides Women and Children* (Calgary: Concord Canada, 1981). Recent Lutheran comment can be found in Jean Marc Debard, "La première Communion dans la principauté luthérienne de Montbéliard du XVI^e au XVIII^e siècle" in Jean Delumeau, ed. *La première Communion: quatre siècles d'histoire* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1987) 279-291; Eric Gritsch, "Infant Communion: What Shape Tradition?" *Academy* 36 (1979): 85-108; *idem*, "Eucharist and Polity: What Kind of Relationship?" *Lutheran Theological Seminary Bulletin* 64 (1984): 28-41; Bjarne Hareide, "Barnekommunion," *Norsk Teologisk Tidsskrift* 80 (1979): 177-184; Bernard Kaempf, "Pour l'accueil des jeunes enfants à l'eucharistie," *Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie religieuses* 61 (1981): 427-441; Marc Lienhard, "La Première Communion chez les luthériens d'Alsace du XVI^e au XX^e siècle," in Delumeau, pp. 255-277; David L. Percy, "Infant Communion," "Part 1: The Historical Practice," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 7 (1980): 43-47, "Part 2: Present Barriers to the Practice," *Currents* 7 (1980): 166-170, "Part 3: Reasons for Its Restoration," *Currents* 8 (1981): 162-165; Walter E. Pilgrim, "Infant Communion: A Matter of Christian Concern," *Word and World* 8 (1988): 62, 64; H. Frederick Reisz, Jr., "Infant Communion: A Matter of Christian Unity," *Word and World* 8 (1988): 63, 65; Heinz Schmidt, "Jugend und Abendmahl," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 84 (1987): 215-231; Frank C. Senn, "Infant Communion and Church Statements," *Dialog* 18 (1979): 86-87; and *idem*, "Issues in 'infant communion,'" *Dialog* 22 (1983): 221-227. For Anglican discussion cf. International Anglican Consultation, Boston, 1985, "Children and Communion: Agreed Statements," *Anglican Theological Review* 68 (1986): 185-197; C. Fitzsimmons Allison, "Anglican Initiatory Rites: A Contribution to the Current Debate," *Anglican and Episcopal History* 56 (1987): 27-43; David R. Holeton, "The Communion of Infants and Hussitism," *Communio Viatorum* 27 (1984): 207-225; *idem*, "The Communion of Infants: The Basel Years (1433-1437)," *Communio Viatorum* 29 (1986): 15-40; *idem*, "Communion of All the Baptized and Anglican Tradition," *Anglican Theological Review* 69 (1987): 13-28; Kenneth W. Stevenson, "A Theological Reflection on the Experience of Inclusion/Exclusion at the Eucharist," *Anglican Theological Review* 68 (1986): 211-221; and Louis Weil, "Disputed Aspects of Infant Communion," *Studia Liturgica* 17 (1987): 256-263.
- ² Luther will be cited from the American Edition of Luther's works, abbreviated LW, by volume and page.
- ³ Tappert, p. 1.
- ⁴ Tappert, pp. 3, 6, 8, 9, 10, 12, 14.
- ⁵ AthCr, 1, 3, 28, 40; Tappert, pp. 19-21.
- ⁶ AC Preface, 2, 8, 16; Tappert, pp. 25-26.
- ⁷ AC IV, 1-3, German; Tappert, p. 30.

- 8 AC V, 1-3, German; Tappert, p. 31.
- 9 For Luther's critique of Augustine's view of grace, cf. Regin Prenter, *Spiritus Creator*, John M. Jensen, tr. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1953).
- 10 Cf. Eric Gritsch and Robert Jenson, *Lutheranism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976) 42-44 on these two forms distinguishing between Law and Gospel.
- 11 AC V, 2, Latin; Tappert, p. 31.
- 12 AC V, 3, Latin; Tappert, p. 31.
- 13 Grammatically it might also be the case that "this faith" in the last sentence simply refers to "faith" in the previous sentence, thus separating faith from belief.
- 14 AC VI, 1, Latin; Tappert, p. 31.
- 15 LW 35, 370.
- 16 AC XX, 23, German; Tappert, p. 44.
- 17 AC XX, 25-26, German; Tappert, p. 45.
- 18 LW 35, 370-371.
- 19 AC XIII, 1-2, German; Tappert, pp. 35-36.
- 20 This would also speak to the participation in the sacraments of those who are developmentally disabled or who suffer from Alzheimer's or other such affliction.
- 21 This last point is made explicit by an addition to the first printed Latin edition. AC XIII, 3, Latin; Tappert, p. 36. As Leif Grane points out, this addition is really not necessary for the meaning of the article. *The Augsburg Confession: A Commentary* John H. Rasmussen, tr. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1987) p. 148.
- 22 Grane, pp. 149-150.
- 23 Apol XIII, 4-5; Tappert, pp. 211-212.
- 24 Apol XIII, 18-22; Tappert, pp. 213-214.
- 25 *Melanchthon on Christian Doctrine: Loci Communes 1555*, Clyde L. Manschreck, tr. & ed. (New York: Oxford University Press) p. 159.
- 26 Cf. Ibid., pp. 202-222, and "Philip Melanchthon: *Loci Communes Theologici*" in *Melanchthon and Bucer*, Wilhelm Pauck, ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969) pp. 133-146.
- 27 LW 36, 59.
- 28 Recognizing that both Luther and Melanchthon sometimes seem to say that the Holy Spirit comes with or after faith.
- 29 LW 35, 35-36.
- 30 LW 36, 73.
- 31 LW 51, 185-187. Cf. LC IV, 47-63; Tappert, pp. 442-444.
- 32 LW 35, 371. "Pray God that he may work faith in you. Otherwise you will surely remain forever without faith, regardless of what you may think or do."
- 33 LC IV, 32-37; Tappert, pp. 440-441.
- 34 LC V, 61 & 69; Tappert, pp. 453-454.

- 35 FC Ep VII, 16-18; Tappert, pp. 483-484.
- 36 FC SD VII, 16; Tappert, p. 572.
- 37 FC SD VII, 57; Tappert, p. 579.
- 38 FC SD VII, 123; Tappert, p. 590.
- 39 FC Ep VII, 19-20; Tappert, p. 484.
- 40 FC Ep VII, 38-39; Tappert, p. 486.
- 41 FC SD VII, 69-70; Tappert, p. 582. This is essentially the same definition of worthiness offered in SC VI, 10; Tappert, p. 352, and LC V, 33-37; Tappert, pp. 450-451, to which the reader is referred.
- 42 LC V, 1-2; Tappert, p. 447.
- 43 SC Preface, 11-12; Tappert, p. 339.
- 44 LC Preface, 1-2; Tappert, p. 362.
- 45 AC XXIV, 5-7, Latin; Tappert, p. 56.
- 46 AC XXV, 1-2, German; Tappert, p. 61. The Latin says "It is not customary...."
- 47 Apol XV, 40; Tappert, p. 220.
- 48 Apol XXIV, 1; Tappert, p. 249.
- 49 *Melanchthon on Christian Doctrine*, p. 220.
- 50 LW 53, 79-80.
- 51 LW 53, 32-33. The passage goes on to speak of excluding "those arrogant people who sin brazenly and without fear while they boast glorious things about the gospel."