



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.



Table and font: Who is welcome?

An invitation to join the conversation about Baptism and Communion

Washed AND Fed: Pastoral Consideration in the Exercise of Eucharistic Hospitality

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When an unbaptized 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.

Use of the Means of Grace Application 37G

In the teaching and practice of congregations, the missional intention for the means of grace needs to be recalled. By God's gift, the Word and the sacraments are set in the midst of the world, for the life of the world.

Use of the Means of Grace Application 51B

Ebenezer is a place of Sacraments

We celebrate Holy Communion weekly. Baptism generally precedes communion, but please know you are welcome at the calling of the Spirit. Children are welcome to commune as soon as the parent(s) and pastor agree to begin that practice; this may occur as early as when a child can receive solid food. Instruction about communion is offered at least annually for children of any age.

From the Ebenezer Lutheran Church website

Set together, the above excerpts describe the congregational commitments and practice at Ebenezer Lutheran Church in Chicago. These statements also describe the blessed tension of being a growing, neighborhood congregation that is attracting more and more people whose experience of faith in community is limited or has been challenged by previous experiences of exclusion. It is therefore pastorally understandable that tension exists between the accepted practice of baptism

preceding communion and the missional (I would prefer the term *evangelical*) character of the sacraments lived out in our midst.

Baptism and the eucharist are interwoven. This reality has sometimes been obscured by practices in the Lutheran traditions that emphasized a greater level of instruction, preparation or intellectual assent to faithful reception of Holy Communion than to baptism. The practice of this congregation is moving toward a less bifurcated understanding: Younger and younger baptized children are regularly receiving the eucharist, and catechetical preaching is employed more and more to instruct the assembly on the meaning of the sacrament regardless of age. It seems to me that the *ideal* set of practices will reunite baptism and eucharistic participation in a more seamless sacramental practice. Infants and adults alike will be eagerly and regularly baptized with lavish invitation, and be shepherded to the table without delay.

Ebenezer's practice, and my own shepherding of the sacraments in this place, therefore, seeks to maintain the ecumenical and historic practice of baptism as initiation to Christian community while being pastorally sensitive to visitors having experienced exclusion from the table or having a generally suspicious orientation toward the purported welcome of the church. Baptism before reception of the eucharist remains *normative* in this community, but we also recognize that non-normative exceptions will occasionally be evangelically preferable to making an unbaptized communicant feel ashamed of their participation. In some cases, these exceptions have in fact facilitated the baptism of adults and the encouragement of faith. Pastorally, I cannot deny the power of the table to, for some, lead to the font. And that in some cases, I have continued to commune an unbaptized person for whom faith leading to baptism was emerging by the Spirit's power.

When the sacraments are truly set in the midst of a pluralistic world, Christ's gifts of love and mercy are indeed to be praised. This does not, to me, indicate the need to abandon the normative practices wisely given by the church to us. Nor does it mean that there will be pastoral instances where the Spirit is working in a direction different than our normative practices. Thus it has always been.

Is that a doctrinal hedge? I rather believe it is simply the reality of sacramental life in communities where baptism is not assumed or even the norm for infants. Pastoral practice does well to operate with integrity within normative practice, while leaving open the possibility that faith can be cultivated in non-normative experience. I believe that faith always emerges and is built up at the sometimes messy intersection of doctrine and practice.

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