



**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*

### **Communion and Baptism**

Stephen Herr

God's Word and the holy sacraments continue to be tremendous gifts to God's people. Through these means, we receive God's grace and the gift of faith "when and where the Spirit pleases." The Word of God and the work of the Holy Spirit together generate faith that is the power to apprehend the grace and mercy the Triune God offers us through the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Through the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, God links us to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are reborn, renewed and reformed. We receive a new identity and through the gift of faith we enter into a life of new obedience marked by the cross of Christ. This is a life in which we die to sin and rise to newness of life. It is a life where we die to the old self and live in service to others. It is a life of faithful discipleship and stewardship. It is a life marked by the Word and water of Christ. It is a life as the children of God distinguished, but not separate from others. It is not a separation of exclusivity marked by arrogance. Rather it is a way of life in faith that is distinctive and closely tied to one who was crucified and raised to new life. This faith in Christ creates a boundary that demarcates, but is not a barrier with non-believers.

While worship bulletins often address the issue of eucharistic hospitality, seldom do I see an announcement or invitation to explore what baptism and the baptismal life is or an invitation to be baptized. Likewise, we might ask ourselves if we should not with more frequently extend an explicit invitation to the unbaptized to come and hear God's Word proclaimed. As we continue to move forward in an increasingly secularized society and culture, the church can look to its past and the era of the apostles and the pre-Constantine church to find inspiration. The church existed then within a society often hostile to its message, yet it practiced hospitality by inviting all to hear God's Word of forgiveness and new life. It invited non-believers into a baptismal life centered on the good news of Christ's death and resurrection.

The traditional and normative practice of the church catholic has been to welcome the baptized, those who have heard the Word and been joined through grace with Christ's death and resurrection, to the holy supper. Martin Luther reminds us of the benefits and the significance of the sacrament of the altar is for the fellowship of all the saints.<sup>1</sup> In this meal, God incorporates us into the Body of Christ for the forgiveness of sins and connects the recipient with all the saints. This connection presupposes faith and this sacrament like baptism is a means of God's grace to be received in the new obedience of faith. Melancthon emphasized this connection between faith and the sacrament in his *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* noting that communion is "useless unless faith, which confirms that the forgiveness of sins is being offered here, is added."

The Christian liturgy invites all to come and hear the Word of God. This is an open invitation for all to come and experience the liberating word of good news and truth. The church invites all into the relationship with Christ through the proclamation of the Word and the visible word of baptism. We believe this Word and Sacrament of Baptism in the power of the Spirit have the power to confirm faith in those who hear it. It is this faith that helps us apprehend and receive the grace imparted in the sacraments.

The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper is instituted for the sake of the baptized as the adopted children of God. We invite the baptized to the eucharistic table as an affirmation that the sacrament of the altar is more than a meal of hospitality or nourishment. The crucified and risen Christ is the host and present in the meal to forgive sins and bring life to all who partake of His body and blood in faith.

In this changing cultural context where fewer persons are connected to Christ and Christ's Church, the church absolutely needs to extend hospitality and invitation. I would encourage the church to increase its hospitality and witness through its invitations for all to come and hear God's proclaimed Word and to be baptized. For through these things one enters into a life with Jesus Christ, a life marked by both newness of life, forgiveness and sacrifice. The Word and water bring us into a relationship with Christ and through faith we live into the promise of grace. Subsequently, the sacrament of Holy Communion sustains us on this journey of faith and the sanctified life through its gifts of fellowship with Christ and all the saints, the forgiveness of our sins, new life and God's abundant grace and hope.

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<sup>11</sup> Martin Luther, *The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ and the Brotherhoods*, in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings* edited by Timothy J. Lull, (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1989), 243.