

PRONOUNCEMENT

Participation of Children in the Lord's Communion



INTRODUCTION

Holy Communion was instituted on the eve of Christ's crucifixion. And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said: *Take, eat, this is my body. Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying: Drink from it, all of you. For this is my blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remissions of sin.* (Matthew 26:26-28)

Keeping this institution, concern more than keeping a command. Holy Communion is above all a gift of grace to the church. A gift, because this sacrament is an instrument of grace through which the Lord wants to reveal Himself. Holy Communion is referred to as: The Lord's supper (1 Cor. 11:20), the cup of the Lord, or the Lord's table (1 Cor. 10:21), the Eucharist - the Lord took the cup and gave thanks. (Greek for thank you: eucharisteo).

In Protestant and Pentecostal circles only baptism and Holy Communion are recognized as sacraments. We believe that there is an indissoluble connection between the sacraments and the gospel. The contents of the sacraments and that which they portray confess and affirm the core of the gospel. They speak of the death of Christ and how man's redemption and salvation flows from it. In other words, a sacrament can be seen as a portrayal of the gospel in visible actions, and in this sense a holy drama.

POWER AND MEANING OF HOLY COMMUNION

Precisely because a sacrament is a manner in which the gospel is presented to us, the power of a sacrament is the same as that of the gospel. The gospel is a testimony about God and his relationship with man and creation. However, the gospel is also a medium through which God reveals and bestows his life and power in Christ to man. This divine life and power is not contained within the gospel as such, it emanates from God alone. What happens is that through the work of the Holy Spirit, the gospel is used as an instrument to make man a participant in God's life and power. This activity of the Holy Spirit is not the inevitable and mechanical result of accepting or preaching the gospel, but an activity according to the will of God who uses the gospel as He likes to do. There is no inherent spiritual or "magical" life and power in the gospel or a sacrament itself.

In other words, Holy Communion is, just like the gospel or Scripture, a means by which the Lord reveals himself to man through his Spirit. A sacrament is never an instrument which can effect by itself the presence and power of Christ. The presence of Christ is a self-revelation of God that is worked by God, and God alone – we can only pray that it will indeed happen.

This means that Holy Communion is more than just a remembrance meal (1 Cor. 11:25). It is also meant to be an event and encounter between Christ and man through an act of God's self-revelation. The one who

partakes in Holy Communion should therefore understand the meaning of this sacrament, and should be susceptible to God's self-revelation.

Furthermore, Holy Communion is not only intended to be a remembrance meal and an encounter or communion with God, it is also an event where believers have communion with each other in the presence of the Lord. It is not intended as an individual act. *For we, being many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread*

(1 Cor. 10:17). We are bound to one another in love and empathy. During the Holy Communion, we testify that we are the united body of Christ and that we are the agency to and through whom Christ wants to reveal Himself.

PARTICIPATION OF HOLY COMMUNION

From all that is said above, the following deductions could be made:

- Holy Communion is celebrated where believers come together to worship (1 Cor. 11:33).
- Holy Communion presupposes that only those who know Christ as redeemer may participate. It is not some thing in which the sinner or unbeliever or somebody who is spiritually indifferent may partake.
- We should bear in mind that it is the "Lord's table" (1 Cor, 10:21). It can therefore not be exclusively the property of any religious group or denomination. Whoever refuses believers Holy Communion merely because they do not belong to a decided ecclesiastical denomination, act in a sectarian manner. They do not understand and confess that the body of Christ is constituted by all those who have been regenerated.
- The Bible cautions us not to partake of Holy Communion "in an unworthy manner" (1 Cor. 11:29). Precisely because the bread and wine portray to us the body and blood of Christ, any indifferent participation in it implies contempt for the Lord's body and blood. Such a person eats and drinks judgment upon him- or herself (1 Cor. 11:29).
- Although indifferent communion at the Lord's table brings the wrath and judgment of God upon such a person, it does not necessarily mean that a person should be perfect before participating of Holy Communion. It means that a believer should examine him- or herself before God in order to confess any sin that the Holy Spirit reveals in his/her life.

It is important to take note that both the sacraments are not meant for unbelievers but for believers. This is the distinction that is found in the Bible – it is not about children versus adults. It is possible that a child could be a believer. To take part in Holy Communion, the partaker has to comply with the following conditions:

- Understand to a certain extent what it means to be a believer and what Holy Communion is all about. (1 Cor 11:29)
- Understand the concept of being redeemed and part of the body of Christ, because Holy Communion means communion with both the Lord and fellow brothers and sisters.
- Be able to examine him- or herself before God (1 Cor 11:28).
- Be able to maintain good relationships with other brothers and sisters in the Lord. This cannot be reached without some understanding of what good relationships comprise of.

FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE PARTICIPATION OF HOLY COMMUNION BY CHILDREN

- There are some scholars who believe that accountability is reached at the age of twelve years. This is derived from Luke 2:42 that says that the child Jesus was twelve years old when his parents, according to custom, attended the feast of Passover in Jerusalem. However, to come to such a conclusion on grounds of Luke 2:42 does not speak of good exegesis. The intention of this verse is not to give the reader an indication of when a child reaches the age of accountability, but to draw the attention of the reader on how young Jesus was when being involved with the things of his Father.
- Holy Communion, as a gift of grace, could be an instrument and marvellous opportunity to teach a born again child the things he/she has to comply with.
- Taking into consideration the psychology and ability of children, they have to be constantly reminded of these truths as they learn by example and by partaking. If they, for example, accepted Jesus at the age of four, which is possible, they will have to be reminded constantly of what they did and what happened to them. By doing this regularly, one is making it a permanent truth at the most appropriate and fruitful time of their lives.
- In the tradition of the church, Holy Communion was often seen as an instrument of discipline; people with shortfalls were forbidden to partake of Holy Communion; it was the place where the church in the past said: "Hands off you are not worthy." It was also tradition that you needed a special dedication sermon the previous night to prepare people to partake of Holy Communion. It was seen as a particularly holy sacrament. This standpoint was also taught in the early liturgy of the AFM. The traditional connotation of Holy Communion as an instrument of discipline is not acceptable as is also the idea that one sermon is more holy than another, for the presence of Jesus makes a sermon holy.
- Besides the Passover as one root of Holy Communion, the meals that Jesus had with people during his earthly ministry was another root. The meaning of these meals was: I love you, I want to have friendship with you and you are a welcome guest. Holy Communion is actually a feast, and somebody called it a feast of tremendous joy. The invitation may be something like this: Hearty welcome to all God's children, even the weak ones, to a feast at his table made possible by Jesus' death.
- The danger can be that we may create a perception of an exclusive meal instead of an inclusive meal for all of God's children, and especially for our children who are used to share everything in life with us. They have to read the Bible, say their prayers, confess their faith, but are not allowed to eat with us because they do not fully understand what it is all about. In our wisdom, we have to take their inability to understand into account and accept responsibility to constantly remind them of the truths involved. Our seriousness with their faith confirms and builds their spiritual lives.
- Those things a believer has to comply with, which were mentioned, should be the content of our teaching to our children while partaking of Holy Communion. Our attitude should be that we proclaim that our children always belong to God. We teach them to brush their teeth and to wash their faces from a very young age - let us do it with God's truth so magnificently portrayed in Holy Communion.

- Age? No age, let the church and the parents rather take responsibility and make sure that our children accept Jesus as personal Saviour. Then offer them Holy Communion while we teach them to understand and to submit to the truths involved.

Believing parents/guardians are the best people to teach children the above truths on Holy Communion.

CONCLUSION

To partake of Holy Communion is indeed the right and privilege of believers. This gift of God is a wonderful instrument in His hands to meet, edify and build the community of the saints!