

# **Early Communion at Tallmadge Lutheran Church**

## **A CASE-STUDY FOR EARLY COMMUNION AT Tallmadge Lutheran Church**

### ***Preface***

The Board of Elders of TLC has given approval to begin offering Early Communion instruction toward the end of the fifth grade, approximately ages 10-11. The Board of Elders and myself understand this is a significant decision. It is helpful to explore all options and give you as much information to help you understand why we are offering Early Communion.

### ***Why change the age for the reception of first communion?***

The reason for this proposed practice of Early Communion is simple: It is of great benefit for all Christians to receive Christ's Body and Blood, and that we should be about giving our children Jesus as much as possible, especially after they are able to examine themselves. We teach and believe that the Lord's Supper gives forgiveness of sins, strengthens faith, and unites Christians into one body for "whoever believes these words, 'Given and shed for you.'"

Early Communion Instruction also provides an intentional place for parents to share and pass on faith to their children.

The challenges for this proposed policy are several:

- a. By separating confirmation and first communion, we run the risk of lessening the importance of the rite of confirmation.
- b. This practice, while gaining acceptance in the LCMS as a whole, is not universally accepted, and does require explanation.
- c. Because this is based on the confession of faith of the individual and not an arbitrary age, it makes the practice appear random, when in fact this is more consistent with our understanding of worthiness of receiving the Sacrament.

What this means in practical terms is that we are giving parents of our congregation the option of offering their children first communion *before* they receive the rite of confirmation.

Confirmation under this practice will continue to occur in the 8th grade while First Communion will be offered to youth 5<sup>th</sup> grade on up following the completion of instruction and self-examination. This is a change for us at TLC, and it is not a change that comes lightly.

We have a fairly long history of tying confirmation and first communion together in the Missouri Synod. That is, more or less, what the practice has been for a couple hundred years. However, the longer history in our church body is much more varied. Luther himself believed and taught that children should be communing at seven to eight years old, and confirmation wasn't even practiced in much of Lutheranism in the 16th and 17th centuries.

## ***Is Early Communion Biblical?***

### ***A Biblical Basis***

**1 Corinthians 11.** The occasion for Paul's writing to the Corinthians was his growing concern over the church's behavior and attitudes, in part, with reference to two aspects of church: Worship and Communion. In chapter eleven, Paul highlights his concerns, and with respect to communion he gives these "directives (v17)":

**v28-** "A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup". The LCMS has long believed that it is imperative to recognize the bread as the body of Jesus in the Lord's Supper, and the wine as the blood of Jesus.

The Greek word "examine"- *diakrino*- means to "judge rightly" or to "recognize". This calls for the simple ability to weigh evidence. In this case, the bread is Jesus' body, the wine is Jesus' blood. There is no call to "understand" or "comprehend", just an identification of the facts (I recognize nuclear engineering, but neither comprehend nor understand its dynamics).

**v27-** "Therefore, whoever ***eats the bread*** or ***drinks the cup*** of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against ***the body and blood*** of the Lord." The critical point of reception is *recognition of* and *faith in* the real presence. And in so doing, recognizing the connection of the **forgiveness of sins** to the body given, and the blood shed (cf. Matthew 26:28).

**v29-** "For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself." The result of poor examination: "Judgment"/ "Condemnation".

### ***Lutheran Confessions***

Luther highlights three preparatory questions for self-examination (*Small Catechism, p.242ff*):

1. Am I sorry for my sins? (2 Co 7:10-11)
2. Do I believe in Jesus Christ and in His words—the words of institution?  
(Lk 22:19-20, 2 Co 13:5)
3. Do I plan, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to change my sinful life? (Eph 4:22ff)

The Sacrament must not be given to the following:

1. Those who are openly ungodly and unrepentant, including those who take part in non-Christian religious worship.
2. Those who are unforgiving, refusing to be reconciled.
3. Those who are of a different confession of faith, since the Lord's Supper is a testimony of the unity of faith.
4. Those who are unable to examine themselves, such as infants, people who have not received proper instruction, or the unconscious.

The classic statement on “communing worthily” comes from the Small Catechism’s teaching concerning “The Sacrament of the Altar”: ***Who, then, receives this sacrament worthily?*** **Answer:** Fasting and bodily preparation are a good external discipline, but he is truly worthy and well prepared who believes these words: “for you” and “for the forgiveness of sins.” On the other hand, he who does not believe these words, or doubts them, is unworthy and unprepared, for the words “for you” require truly believing hearts. (SC VI, 9–10; Tappert, 352)

**Faith**, as that means by which a sinner receives the gifts of God, takes front and center in all of the confessional teaching regarding the reception of the Lord’s Supper in a worthy manner (that is, to one’s blessing). Faith in these words is *necessary*, and faith in these words is *sufficient* for an individual to commune worthily.

Luther notes (Large Catechism, Tappert, p. 456):

*“Therefore let every head of a household remember that it is his duty, by God’s injunction and command, to teach or have taught to his children the things they ought to know. Since they are received into the Christian church, they should also enjoy this fellowship of the sacrament so that they may serve us and be useful. For they must all help us to believe, to love, to pray, and to fight the devil.”*

### **Is Early Communion a common practice in the LCMS?**

The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod in its 2004 convention approved the adoption of a new hymnal, entitled *Lutheran Service Book*. As a part of that process, the LCMS adopted the rite of confirmation *and* a separate rite of first communion. This has gained significant ground in our church body recently, especially since the advent of LSB. Several churches in this area practice early communion.

### **Should confirmation and first communion be separated? Why or Why Not?**

I have come to the conclusion that they should be separated for this reason: there is great teaching benefit in having a specific period of instruction in the middle school years (confirmation instruction historically), *but* there are many good theological reasons for communing children at a younger age. I am suggesting roughly 10 to 11 years old for first communion.

### **Conclusion**

My prayer is that this practice will deepen our love for Christ’s Sacrament of the Altar, for teaching our children the faith, and will serve to strengthen the bond between our young people and their congregation. God grant it, for Jesus’ sake!

Pastor Andy Alberts  
Tallmadge Lutheran Church

## **FAQ**

### **1. Why are we offering the option of receiving communion before confirmation?**

Based on Scriptural and confessional teachings, many of our students should be spiritually ready to receive the Lord's Supper long before the end of 8th grade. We want them to be able to receive the benefits of the Lord's Supper as soon as they are ready. We also hope by separating the communion experience from the confirmation experience will help students to not view confirmation as graduation, but as simply one of many other faith stepping stones in their spiritual development.

### **2. Is receiving communion before confirmation an approved practice within the Lutheran Church- Missouri Synod (LCMS)?**

Yes. The LCMS has discussed this practice for several years and has concluded that there is no Biblical reason to prevent offering communion before confirmation. Increasing numbers of LCMS congregations are moving to the practice. Latest estimates run roughly 30-35% of LCMS congregations practice early communion.

The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod in its 2004 convention approved the adoption of a new hymnal, entitled Lutheran Service Book. We have adopted this as our congregational hymnal. As a part of that process, the LCMS adopted the rite of confirmation and a separate rite of first communion. This has gained significant ground in our church body recently, especially since the coming of LSB.

### **3. What does the Bible say about the "right age" for receiving the Lord's Supper?**

The Bible gives no specifics on "the right age." First Corinthians 11:27-29 simply says that communicants must be able to examine themselves and discern what is happening in the Lord's Supper. Again, we believe that many children are able to do this before the end of 8th grade.

### **4. How did we decide on 5th grade as the starting point for offering "early communion?"**

With parental support and involvement, we feel that 10-11 year olds can understand what sin is, the importance of repentance and faith, and trust in the mystery of Holy Communion for the forgiveness of sins.

**5. What if I don't want my child to receive the Lord's Supper until after confirmation?**

The Early Communion class would be optional. Parents and students who would rather wait until confirmation to receive the Lord's Supper may continue to do so. Parents will determine when their student is ready to receive the sacrament.

**6. Will the Lord's Supper continue to be taught in regular Confirmation Classes?**

Yes... absolutely! Students who choose not to receive communion before completing the confirmation program will still need this instruction and it will be a great review for the students already receiving the sacrament.

**7. If the Lord's Supper is still taught in 8th Grade, what benefit is there to taking the Early Communion class?**

Because the confirmation experience entails so many topics that need to be discussed, the content of Early Communion is unable to be covered as thoroughly as we would like. The Early Communion class allows us an opportunity for more teaching so that students fully understand the meaning, benefits and honor of partaking of the Lord's Body. The Early Communion Class would also provide a time to instruct both students and parents and to encourage faith talk at home.

**8. Do I need to be baptized before taking communion?**

Yes.

**9. If my student takes the Early Communion class, does that mean they still need to take confirmation classes?**

Yes. The Early Communion class has a different purpose than confirmation classes. The Early Communion class covers our beliefs about the Lord's Supper only. Confirmation covers our doctrinal beliefs and practices. The Early Communion class will definitely enhance a student's confirmation experience, but can't replace it.

**10. When would the First Communion class be offered?**

I will offer Early Communion Instruction on Sunday mornings during Lent with the First communion celebrated on Maundy Thursday during Holy Week. This would be a six-session class for students and their parents/adults.

**11. Who would be able to take the class the first year?**

All students 5<sup>th</sup> grade through 8<sup>th</sup> grade would be able to take the Early Communion class.