

Incarnate Word Tract Series #23 First Communion

In recent years, many Lutheran theologians have been studying intensively the practice of Confirmation. And one thing that they have discovered is that historically there is no necessity for a child to be confirmed before receiving the Blessed Sacrament for the first time.

Confirmation in the Lutheran Church

At the time of the Reformation there was generally no such thing as Confirmation in the Lutheran Church. It was only years later during the periods of Pietism and Rationalism that Confirmation became a general practice in Lutheranism. And unfortunately, when Confirmation was introduced into the Lutheran Church it became a prerequisite for first communion. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in particular, people had the idea that a child had to be well versed in all of the doctrines of Holy Scripture before he was eligible to receive Holy Communion. And so a child's intellectual attainments and ability to memorize determined, at least partially, whether or not he could receive the Body and blood of our Lord. A child first had to prove that he could repeat doctrinal formulations and Bible passages before he could be confirmed, and he could not receive the Sacrament of the Altar before Confirmation. This attitude still seems to prevail in Lutheranism today.

First Communion in the Lutheran Church

At the time of the Reformation Lutherans generally followed the practice of the Western Church when it came to first communion. The Western Church had for many centuries given a child his first communion when he had attained the "age of reason," that is from the age of seven to twelve. In the basis of I Cor. 11:28-29, it was generally felt that a child should have an understanding of what he was doing when he received the Sacrament and should know the difference between right and wrong, the Ten Commandments, the Creed and the Our Father, etc. And so first communion was usually postponed until this age. But the Church did not feel that a child had to be acquainted with the whole of Christian doctrine before receiving the Body and Blood of Christ. (In the Eastern Church, however, it was and still is the practice to give a child his first communion immediately after Baptism.)

Why an Early First Communion?

Psychologists have demonstrated that a child at the age of about seven is much more open to suggestions and influences from adults than is a child of fourteen, the age at which most Lutheran children make their first communion. From the psychological point of view alone, it would be far better for a child to experience his first communion "as a little child" than as a somewhat cynical, sophisticated teenager.

But the big question that we have to answer is “How important is Holy Communion?” In past centuries, first communion was postponed until the age of fourteen during an era when the Sacrament was considered a relatively unimportant matter. This was a time when the Sacrament was celebrated only four or six times a year and was considered little more than a symbol of God’s grace. But today, thanks be to God, the situation is different. Lutherans are once again beginning to realize that the Sacrament of the Altar is of the essence of the Church and can be withdrawn from a baptized Christian only for the most serious reasons. Luther reminds us in the **Large Catechism** that we ought not stay away from the Sacrament “lest we deprive ourselves of Life” (V, 59).

Now the question that each congregation, each pastor and each Christian has to ask himself: “If we are to please God, how long dare we deprive our children of the Sacrament which preserves us and all Christians unto eternal life?” We trust that the Holy Spirit will lead us to a God-pleasing answer.