

## Must baptism precede communion?

By David Farley

Not too long ago, a 12-year-old girl walked up to me after church with tears running down her cheeks. Her parents were right behind her. They were upset. I had never seen these people before. I wondered what I said in my sermon that caused such angst. They said, “Our daughter has been taking communion for years and she is not baptized. You said this was wrong and now our daughter is inconsolable. Just look at her!” I felt horrible. They never came back to our church. Was I wrong?

This put me on a research journey....

Should an unbaptized person take communion? Historically every Christian denomination (literally) has affirmed that one must be baptized before communion. Why have the vast majority of Christians throughout church history argued that baptism must precede the Lord’s Supper?

Before I answer this question let me explain why this question matters. Jesus Christ only gave two sacraments to the church to celebrate the gospel. Since the gospel is the most important message in the history of the world, our observance of the sacraments must portray this message as accurately as possible. When people take the Lord’s Supper before baptism the content of the gospel message gets muddy (is made unclear)....

I can understand why you may think that GCF is a little nutty!!! You may not have heard this before, even though it has been the position of every theologian and denomination in church history up until very recently.

Our position is actually pretty loose (even considered liberal by some) compared to other churches and most of church history. Historically many churches have argued that you had to be baptized and a formal member in good standing of a church to take communion. This is not our position... we are simply saying that baptism must come before communion.

Let me say one more thing by way of introduction. I approach this topic with fear and trembling. Why? Because baptism and the celebration of the Lord's supper are very personal. At the same time, I care deeply about the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the sacraments are a picture of the gospel. So please have mercy on me as I seek to be faithful to scripture.

Back to my earlier question, why have the majority of Christians believed that baptism must precede the Lord's Supper? I will provide five reasons.

**First, the meaning of the sacraments determines the order of the sacraments.**

This will be the longest point...

Let's look at the meaning of baptism. Baptism symbolizes several glorious realities.

**Baptism symbolizes public association with the triune God.**

**Matthew 28:18–19 (ESV)** — **18** And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. **19** Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

**Baptism symbolizes union with Christ.**

**Romans 6:3–5 (ESV)** — **3** Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? **4** We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. **5** For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

**Baptism symbolizes cleansing from sin**

**Acts 22:16 (ESV)** — **16** And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.’

**Baptism symbolizes entrance into the new covenant community the church of Jesus Christ.**

(Baptism symbolizes all the blessings of the new covenant, which we will study in detail next week. For a detailed explanation of this point please read my paper).

**Baptism symbolizes the reception of the Holy Spirit.**

There are three texts that make this connection (Mark 1:8, 1 Cor. 12:13, Acts 2:38)

**Baptism symbolizes escaping from judgment.**

**1 Peter 3:20–21 (ESV)** — **20** because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. **21** Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,

All seven symbols point to events that happen at the beginning of the Christian life, which is why it is called the sacrament of initiation. Since it is the sacrament of initiation, it makes sense to get baptized at conversion. On the other hand, the Lord's Supper is the sacrament of continuation.

Like baptism, the Lord's Supper is rich in meaning. What does it mean? Several things...

**The Lord's supper is a remembrance of the gospel.**

**Luke 22:19 (ESV)** — **19** And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

**The Lord's supper is a proclamation of the gospel.**

**1 Corinthians 11:26 (ESV)** — **26** For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

**The Lord's supper is a picture of our communion with Christ and a means of spiritual nourishment.**

**1 Corinthians 10:16 (ESV)** — **16** The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?

**The Lord's supper is a picture of Christian unity.**

**1 Corinthians 10:17 (ESV) — 17** Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

**The Lord's supper is a celebration of the future heavenly feast.**

**Matthew 26:29 (ESV) — 29** I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.”

**The Lord's supper is a renewal of the new covenant.**

How? Every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we are being reminded of all the blessings of the new covenant (chiefly- the forgiveness of sins). Furthermore, when we walk down the aisle to eat the bread and drink the wine, we are once again putting our faith in Jesus Christ, the condition of the new covenant. For more explanation of the relationship between the sacraments on the new covenant look to my paper.

**Application:**

Here is the point...

Everything conveyed in the Lord's Supper is only true of Christians. It does not make sense for non-Christians to remember their redemption in Christ, celebrate their ongoing relationship with Christ, receive spiritual nourishment from Christ, celebrate Christian unity, look forward to the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, or renew their covenant with God. Therefore, non-Christians should not participate in communion.

**The meaning of the sacraments determines the order of the sacraments.**

Baptism symbolizes what happens when one becomes a Christian and the Lord's Supper symbolizes what is true of being a Christian. Baptism must precede the Lord's Supper. If the Lord's Supper comes first, the meaning of the sacraments is torn asunder.

If someone takes the lord's supper without being baptized, they are saying that they can feast on Christ or commune with Christ (symbolized in communion) without having their sins washed away (symbolized in baptism). This is not true to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The meaning of the sacraments determines their order. Are there other reasons to believe that baptism must precede the Lord's Supper? Yes, this brings us to the second point.

### **Second, the great commission determines the order of the sacraments.**

In Matthew 28:18-20 we read,

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

In Jesus' final instructions to his disciples, he commands them to make disciples of all the nations. This means baptizing new disciples in the name of the triune God and teaching them to obey all of his commands. The order is significant; they must baptize first. Why? Because baptism symbolizes entering the Christian life. This is the very first thing a new convert must do. After he is baptized, he must obey all of Christ's commands. One of Christ's commands is to celebrate the Lord's Supper.

The great commission indicates that the order of the sacraments matters. Is there an order to the sacraments in other New Testament texts? Yes, this brings us to the third point.

### **Third, Paul's teaching determines the order of the sacraments.**

In **1 Corinthians 10:16–17**, Paul writes, "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread." Verse 17 teaches that those who are participating in communion are part of the one body of Christ represented by the one loaf. If they are part of the body of Christ, they should have been baptized, since there is no category in Scripture for an unbaptized member of the body of Christ. If they have not been baptized, they are breaking Christ's first commandment. This brings us to 1 Corinthians 11.

Paul writes in **1 Corinthians 11:24-25**, "and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, 'This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way also he

took the cup, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’” Paul reminds us through the words of Christ that we eat the bread and drink the cup in remembrance of Jesus Christ. But how can a non-Christian remember someone they don’t know? And if they know Christ they should be baptized.

This brings us to Paul’s next set of warnings in **1 Corinthians 11:27–29**,

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.

Eating the bread and drinking the cup in an unworthy manner in this particular context (1 Cor. 11:17-22) refers to the practice of celebrating communion while remaining unreconciled to members of the body of Christ. But “eating in an unworthy manner” also includes coming to communion with unconfessed sin.

Commenting on these verses **Thomas Schreiner** writes, “Paul did not call for morbid introspection here. His point was that those who are living in blatant sin are partaking in an unworthy manner.”

Blatant sin includes a professing Christian who refuses to get baptized.

Blatant sin also includes any non-Christian, who has not repented of anything...

The last thing anyone should want to do is eat and drink God’s judgment on themselves...

#### **Fourth, the Bible provides no evidence to the contrary.**

Why are there no examples of unbaptized Christians taking communion in the Bible? Because converts were baptized as soon as they were converted (Acts 2:38-42, 8:12; 10: 47-48). In fact, there is no category in the New Testament for an unbaptized Christian. The only exception is the thief on the cross and he is the exception that proves the rule. When someone became a Christian, she was baptized right away, before she had time to participate in the Lord’s Supper. This implies that there is no reason for a Christian to take the Lord’s Supper before being baptized.

Well-meaning Christian parents who let their unbaptized children take the Lord's Supper should be asked, "Is your child a Christian?" If the answer is "Yes," the follow up question should be, "Why are you encouraging your child to disobey Christ's command to get baptized?" Parents who say, "No, my child is not a Christian" or "We are not sure if our child is a Christian," should be asked why they feel comfortable exposing their child to God's judgments as described by Paul in 1 Cor. 11: 27-32. This brings us to the next point...

**Fifth, the "communion before baptism" position devalues baptism.**

If churches allow unbaptized people to take communion, they are implying that communion is more important than baptism. Furthermore, they are implying that New Testament baptism is optional. When someone says that, "baptism is not a prerequisite for communion," he is essentially saying, "It is ok to ignore Christ's command to get baptized but it is really important to obey his command to celebrate communion."

I have presented five lines of evidence for our position. Next, I will address the three most common objections.

**Objection one- your position can't be proof-texted.**

You are right, I can't point to one verse in the Bible that proves that baptism must precede communion, but I'm not concerned since I can't point to one verse in the Bible that proves the doctrine of the trinity. We believe the doctrine of the trinity by synthesizing the truths of several texts. Some texts teach that there is one God while other texts teach that the Father is God, Jesus is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. Putting several texts together provides sufficient evidence for the doctrine of the trinity, one of the most important doctrines in the Bible. Furthermore, I can't prove from one verse of the Bible that Jesus Christ is one person with two distinct natures. This doctrine is also derived by synthesizing several texts. In a similar sense, we (with the rest of church history) believe that baptism must precede the Lord's Supper as a result of synthesizing the truths of several texts.

**Objection two- your position makes children feel excluded.**

Caring parents often say, “Your position makes my children feel left out, confused, and discouraged.” In one sense, we don’t want anyone to feel left out. As the father of five boys, I completely understand this sentiment. At the same time, it is good for children to understand that they are not Christians because they were born into Christian homes. When they are not allowed to come forward for communion, they are reminded of the fact that they are outside of the body of Christ until they repent of their sins, trust Jesus, and get baptized. This brings us to the last objection.

### **Objection three- your position hinders evangelism.**

Well-meaning people say, “When non-Christians are encouraged to participate in communion they are forced to wrestle with the broken body and shed blood of Christ. This may be what God uses to save them.”

Solomon Stoddard wrote a pamphlet in 1679 defending this position. It was titled, “Nine Arguments Against Examinations Concerning the Work of Grace Before Admission to the Lord’s Supper.”<sup>1</sup> When Jonathan Edwards, Stoddard’s grandson, opposed this practice, it cost him his job.

In response, let me remind us that there are no examples in the Bible of anyone taking communion before baptism.

Furthermore, there are no examples in the Bible of anyone using communion to convert others.

Finally, using communion to convert others, ignores the New Testament’s teaching about the meaning of the sacrament. Baptism is a picture of entering the Christian life and communion is a picture of ongoing fellowship with Christ and his people. When we get this order wrong, we are saying that someone can experience communion with Christ (symbolized in communion) without genuine repentance (symbolized in baptism).

We have looked at reasons for our practice and some common objections...

Let’s get practical.

---

<sup>1</sup> Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 400, footnote 167.

**First**, when we decided to move to weekly communion, we anticipated having our own baptismal on site... There is going to be allot of grace...

**Second**, there is a big difference between someone who says, “you guys are crazy, I don’t think I have to get baptized to take communion and I don’t see the need to get baptized any time soon, but I still want to take communion?

And someone who says, “I understand and agree with your position but you only do baptisms once a year...” Man... this is frustrating...

**Third**, parents... if your child wants to get baptized please read our FAQ on baptism. It is difficult to know if a child is old enough to get baptized. We are right in the thick of this. Since I know myself, I have decided not to make this decision in regards to my own kids. If my kids want to get baptized, they need to convince the other elders... this is not the parent’s decision. It is the churches decision. God gave the sacrament of baptism to the church not the parents. With that said, the parent’s input is invaluable.

Fourth, how often are we going to say this??? probably not every week...

Fifth, Lets pray that God would allow us to see more baptisms...

If you are not convinced of our position, we can still be friends. But hopefully this sermon has encouraged you to study this issue on your own... (you can pick up a copy of my paper on the way out)

We want to get these symbols right, since they represent the gospel, and the gospel is the most important message in the history of the world. If you would like to talk more, please contact one of the pastors. Let’s pray and then celebrate the lord’s table together...