

Communion and Baptism at Community Church

INTRODUCTION

As a non-denominational church, we recognize that people in our church come from various denominational backgrounds and traditions, and some of us have no church background at all. In light of this, we want to provide some guidance on the practices of communion and baptism at Community Church.

Communion and baptism are clearly biblical practices, yet there is significant disagreement among Bible-believing churches as to how they are carried out. For example, some churches baptize infants (*paedobaptism*) and reserve communion for such an age when a child understands the Gospel for themselves. Others practice infant dedication, and reserve baptism for that later time when a child's faith is claimed as his or her own (*credobaptism*). And even with the practice of communion, some churches believe that the cup actually become the body and blood of Jesus (*transubstantiation*) while others see them as merely symbols (*memorialism*) that Jesus used to teach about his sacrifice. There are many other frameworks for understanding these practices. The above examples are mentioned in an attempt to present the diversity of Christian viewpoints among Bible-believing, Jesus-following churches. In light of this diversity, and in looking at the Scriptures, we believe that these practices are of first importance in the church. We call them "ordinances," which means the Bible has officially instructed the church to practice them.

Communion: Jesus institutes Communion (also known as "the Lord's Supper", or "the Eucharist") in Matthew 26:26-30 (see also Mark 14:22-26, Luke 22:14-23) and Paul provides instructions for the meal as an ongoing practice for the church in 1 Corinthians 11. But these texts, while they prescribe the practices, do not provide us with the specific details that would answer questions like, "At what age can a child participate?" or "How often should the meal be observed?" or even "Should we use wine or grape juice?" The practice has been ordained for us to observe, but many of the specifics are not described in detail in the Scriptures. This leads to the breadth and variety of practices that we see across the various Bible-believing denominations.

Baptism: In the same way, baptism is also commanded in the Scriptures, most famously by Jesus as part of the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20. But even as we look at the various texts that address baptism, these, too, allow for a variety of interpretations as they are not given to us to answer the specific questions we find ourselves asking, like "How old should a person be before they are baptized?" and "Should we baptize infants or only older children who can understand what Jesus has done?" or "Do you have to be submerged in water to be baptized, or can you be sprinkled with water?" There is at least some evidence in the Bible for many of the various practices embraced by different denominations.

Non-Denominationalism: In light of this, and in light of our intentional non-denominational identity as a church, Community Church formally recognizes and allows for a diversity of understandings on these specific issues. In the same breath, however, for the sake of unity in the church and clarity in our teaching, we need to adopt a consistent posture that reflects what we believe is the best available interpretation of these Scriptures. This means that as a church, we have established what we believe the Scriptures teach and we will teach this same interpretation to our church community, but at the same time, we will allow for an individual freedom of conviction should members of our church body be strongly convinced of a different practice -- so long as this conviction is based upon Scripture. We believe the ordinances themselves (baptism and communion) are of first importance for the church; but we believe the implementation of these ordinances is a secondary issue, and that it is an area where grace can be extended for the sake of unity and the Gospel witness to the world.

This document presents the current practices that have been adopted by Community Church relating to baptism and communion. We present these practices as a "preferred path" -- our recommendation with regards to how the inclusion of these ordinances in the life of our church will be carried out. But even while establishing this norm, we continue to recognize that we extend grace and a freedom of conviction on the secondary issues of precisely how these ordinances are carried out in the life of the church based on previous denominational backgrounds and understandings as we all seek to build our lives on the truth of the Bible and on Jesus' call for unity in the church.

ON BAPTISM

"Believer's Baptism"

At Community Church, we believe that "believer's baptism" (*credobaptism*) is the more compelling interpretation of Scripture and a more culturally-appropriate implementation of the ordinance of baptism today. We take this from texts like Acts 2:36-38.

³⁶ *"Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah."*

³⁷ *When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"*

³⁸ *Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."*

We understand baptism to be the appropriate response to a clear understanding of the Gospel as one puts one's faith in Jesus and chooses to follow Him. Baptism is an act of identifying with Christ's death, burial, and resurrection as described in Romans 6:2-4.

³ *Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.*

Therefore, we reserve baptism as an intentional decision in the life of someone who understands what Jesus has done for them, and who chooses to put their faith in his death and resurrection. We also believe that full submersion baptism carries the strongest reflection of our identification with Jesus' death and resurrection.

However, we welcome and accept Christians who have been baptized as infants without any requirement for "rebaptism" so long as their original baptism has continued to be an accurate reflection of their participation in the covenant community of faith. In layman's terms, this means that if you were baptized as a child because of cultural tradition but your family didn't continue to raise you as a Christian, getting baptized as an adult may be an appropriate response to choosing Jesus for yourself. But if you were raised in the church, love Jesus with all your heart, and have been following him since you can remember, and you belonged to a denomination that practiced infant baptism, we recognize this baptism as valid and meaningful and as something worth celebrating, and we hold no additional expectations of baptism as an adult. When it comes to children, this means that we do not baptize infants at Community Church, but that we reserve baptism for such a time in a child's life when they can understand God's love for them, confess and repent of their sin before a holy God, understand and accept Jesus' sacrifice on the cross for them, and decide to follow Jesus as Lord of their lives. We do not believe there is a specific age at which these realizations occur; rather, we recognize that faith is a developmental process and that different children will reach these conclusions at different ages based on their own temperament, differences in their formal instruction and parenting, and based on the unique work of the Holy Spirit in each life. We also believe that parents carry the primary responsibility for discerning when baptism has been understood and when it is an appropriate response in a child's life. The church will provide teaching and opportunities to learn about baptism, but parents should be the ones who make the determination that their child is ready for such a declaration.

The main question that arises from the practice of Believer's baptism is this: What is the status of a child before they are baptized into the church? Those who practice infant baptism celebrate baptism as entrance into the covenant community of faith, with children having been born into this family of God. As those who practice believer's baptism, we mirror this understanding through the practice of dedication. Dedication is not a baptism. Instead, it is a moment where an infant is recognized and welcomed into the church as a member of the covenant community of faith. As part of a believing family, a child is celebrated as a full participant in the body of Christ until such a time as they understand and profess this faith for themselves through baptism. For this reason, we recommend infant dedication as a normative practice at Community Church and we encourage and teach towards baptism as children grow in their own understanding of faith and life following Jesus.

ON COMMUNION

"Memorialism"

At Community Church, we believe the best reading of the Scriptures about the Lord's Supper supports a memorial view. Jesus speaks in metaphors throughout the Gospels: "I am the vine," "I am the gate," "I am the way, and the truth, and the life," "I am the bread of life," and "I am the light of the world," are just a few examples. We believe Jesus has ordained the remembrance of his sacrifice using the tangible, sensory objects of the bread and the cup to teach his people and to help his people remember his atoning work at the cross (the bread representing his body, broken for us) and the offer of a new covenant relationship with God (the cup representing the blood of the new covenant, and the offer of eternal life with God). We see this in texts like Luke 22:19-20.

¹⁹ *And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me."*

²⁰ *In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you."*

We understand these texts to mean that Jesus was instituting a memorial meal to remind his people from that night onward of his sacrifice and of the new relationship with God accomplished by his death and resurrection. We think the best interpretation of Jesus' words acknowledges the figurative nature of this teaching as consistent with his entire ministry of speaking in metaphors, parables, and images. While we subscribe to a memorialist view of communion, we also emphasize the very real presence of Christ with us during the Lord's Supper, as we do whenever we are gathered for worship, as Jesus has promised that "where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them" (Matthew 18:20). Our church has historically celebrated Communion on the first Sunday of every month as a regular commemoration of Christ's work on the cross for us.

We believe Communion is reserved for those who have put their personal faith in what Christ has done for them at the cross and as a corporate expression of belonging to His body the church -- the very things Jesus was communicating and teaching as he repurposed the elements of bread and wine at that Passover meal. Participation in communion is a declaration that a believer recognizes what Christ has done in atoning for our sin and offering a reconciled, new covenant life together with God, including expectancy for Christ's return. As such, only Bible-believing Christians should participate in Communion. The Bible even has some dire warnings for those who participate in an "unworthy manner," that they eat and drink judgment on themselves. Paul provides instructions for the observance of communion in 1 Corinthians 11:26-29.

²⁷ *So then, 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.* ²⁸ *Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup.* ²⁹ *For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves.*

In light of this, we "fence" the Communion table (we establish parameters for participation) by reminding the gathered congregation of the meal's meaning and significance each time, and by asking those who have yet to put their faith in Jesus to refrain with integrity from participation. And for those who do participate, we intentionally include a time of silence preceding the observance for reflection, confession, and repentance before the Lord.

When it comes to children, however, we again recognize the developmental process of a growing faith. As full members of the covenant community of faith, we welcome children of believing families to participate in Communion, but we would ask that participation be reserved for an appropriate stage of a child's spiritual development when they can understand God's love for them, their own sin, and that Jesus took the penalty for their sin upon Himself by dying on the cross, and that we can live our lives following Him. We always want our actions to be meaningful.

Again, we believe parents are biblically responsible for both teaching these truths to their children, as well as discerning when it is developmentally appropriate for them to begin taking communion with us. We believe that participating in Communion as a child is yet another way of teaching the Gospel to our children as they are growing up. The repeating rhythm of coming

forward, eating the bread, drinking the cup, year after year as they are growing into their faith can be a powerful experiential part of their faith development. We also encourage parents to use communion as an opportunity for direct conversations with their own children about following Jesus. In this way, the church's celebration of Communion provides a catalyst for ongoing conversations between parents and children about what genuine, living faith in Jesus Christ looks like. In light of this, baptism is not a prerequisite for participation in Communion. The prerequisite for celebrating communion with the church is having developmentally appropriate faith in Jesus Christ and his work on the cross that has reconciled us to our God.

EXCURSUS: A SUGGESTED PATH for CHILDREN

In light of the above discussion, Community Church offers a *suggested* path for those families who are raising children in this Christian community. This path is suggested because we believe it to be faithful to Scripture; this path is suggested because we believe that consistency of practice is healthy for a church community; and this path is suggested because we value the important role parents play in knowing their own children and making decisions with them as they move forward in their own journeys of faith in Jesus Christ.

- BIRTH** **Dedication:** We recommend infant dedication as a regular practice for new parents at Community Church. At some point in the first six months or so, a child and their parents stand before the church family on a Sunday morning and express gratitude to the Lord and dedicate the child to the Lord. Through this ceremony, the church family welcomes the child to the covenant community of faith, and commits to supporting this family and teaching this child what it means to follow Jesus.
- CHILDHOOD** **Communion:** At some point in early childhood, often coinciding with a child attending our regular grown-up Sunday morning worship services and being exposed to the practice of Communion, children should be confronted with the beauty and truth of what Jesus has done for them. We expect parents to teach their children about the meaning of the bread and cup as symbols that remind us what Christ has done for us, even before their children are participants in the ordinance of Communion. But as parents see evidence of faith in Christ in their little ones, we welcome parents to bring their children up with them to take communion together at a time when the parents discern that it is appropriate based on the seeds of faith present in their children.
- ADOLESCENCE** **Baptism:** As children continue to grow in their faith, and as parents continue to model faithful Christian living and have real conversations and shared experiences with their children as followers of Jesus, part of the faith journey of a child includes differentiating themselves from the faith of their parents and choosing to follow Jesus for themselves. Again, there isn't a magic age at which this takes place; it's different for every child. But it's at this point that baptism becomes the appropriate response to a child's understanding of the Gospel.

ADULTHOOD

Membership: As children graduate from high school, whether they head off to college or move directly into the work world, joining the church as a member is an appropriate next step in their participation in the covenant community of faith.

Again, these stages are mere examples. Each faith journey develops at its own pace. Some children are baptized before adolescence. Others wait until college or even early adulthood. Age is less important than understanding and experience. The important thing here is to have real conversations with our children -- as we do with everyone who considers participation in communion and baptism -- to ensure that they understand what they're doing and that these ordinances are carried out within a living, real relationship with Jesus and as a faithful response to His initiative in reconciling us to our God.

CONCLUSION

Together, these practices and ordinances function as rites of passage and catalyst opportunities to open significant conversations and to offer decision-points in the lives of our children. However, it should be clear that these catalyst conversations alone will not "produce" saving faith in our children. We recognize that parents are responsible before God to model genuine faith, to evidence visibly the biblical practices of prayer and Bible study, community, giving, and service and to engage their children in matters of life and faith throughout each day of their lives; to bring the Scriptures to bear on real life and to talk about them "when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates" (Deuteronomy 6:7-9).

Community Church is here to partner with parents and all those who desire to make disciples -- whether those disciples are our children, our family, our neighbors, or our coworkers. We will continue to provide resources for growth and opportunities to live out our faith in Jesus in tangible and visible ways. After all, we're making disciples for the glory of Christ and the good of the city!