

AN APPEAL FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY

ROMANS 14:1-8, 13; JOHN 13:34-35, 15:12-13; COLOSSIANS 3:12-14

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Now that the new rule made by the Elder Board has been made public, I expect there to be a lot of questions. I have tried to anticipate what some of the questions might be, and I would like to address them right away.

My hope and my prayer is that there may be unity in the Body of Christ. If unity depended on everyone agreeing on what is right or wrong in regard to this matter of whether or not a person must be baptized before he can take communion, then there would be no hope for unity in the Body of Christ. Prior to this rule, some people in our church believed it was wrong for people who had not been baptized to receive communion while other people believed it was not wrong. Now that the rule has been established, people's beliefs have not changed. Those who believed it was wrong still believe it is wrong and are happy that there is now a rule to back up their conviction. Those who believed it was OK for people to receive communion even if they are not baptized still believe the same way and may feel a bit confused or frustrated with the new rule.

The main thing I want to do now is convince both of these groups of people to live in unity with each other even though their convictions may differ. The rule will not create unity. Neither will a lack of a rule create unity. The only thing that will create unity is love. This is especially true in a situation where people hold different viewpoints on a wide variety of issues. We must love one another. With the help of God's grace, we must strive to understand one another so that we can love one another. We don't have to agree with each other to have unity. Elders and pastors and church leaders don't have to agree on all the issues for there to be unity in a church. Unity does not depend on everyone doing the same thing the same way. But unity does depend on love. There can be no unity when one group of people is putting down another group of people by saying out loud or in their hearts, "How can they believe it is wrong to receive communion without first receiving baptism. There is nothing in the Bible that requires a Christian to be baptized first. How can they be so ignorant and narrow-minded?" When one group of people looks

down on another group of people in that manner, there can be no unity, because there is no love. And there can be no unity when one group of people condemns another group of people by saying out loud or in their hearts, "They are disobeying God by deliberately receiving communion prior to being baptized and encouraging others to do so. They are sinning and they need to repent." When one group of people condemns another group of people in that way, there can be no unity, because there is no love. True love works hard at understanding other people and why they believe what they believe. True love can disagree, but it will never condemn or belittle other people for what they believe.

Why do some people believe it is wrong to receive communion prior to being baptized? Here at CCCNJ, people have actually shared why they have this conviction. They point to verses in the Bible like EXODUS 12:48-49 which reads:

"An alien living among you who wants to celebrate the Lord's Passover must have all the males in his household circumcised; then he may take part like one born in the land. No uncircumcised male may eat of it. The same law applies to the native-born and to the alien living among you."

It is argued here that circumcision symbolizes water baptism and celebrating the Lord's Passover symbolizes receiving communion. And the conclusion is that the same ceremonial law that applied to people living in Old Testament times must apply to people living under the New Covenant. It was wrong for people who were uncircumcised to partake in the Passover; therefore, it is also wrong for people who are not baptized to partake in Holy Communion.

Another popular passage used by people who believe that the Bible teaches us that baptism is a requirement for communion is found in ACTS 2. After Peter preached his sermon on the Day of Pentecost, many people were convicted and asked

Peter, "What should we do?" Peter answered with these words, recorded in ACTS 2:38:

"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."

Then, later in the same chapter we read these words:

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."

It is argued that the order of events recorded in ACTS 2 establishes a tradition or even a mandate for the church throughout the ages—baptism first and breaking of the bread second.

And then, we have 1 CORINTHIANS 11:27-29. That passage of scripture reads:

"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. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself."

Some people will use this passage to argue that it is wrong to receive communion without being baptized. They will say that baptism for Christians is not an option. It is a command. Christians who have not yet obeyed the command are living in a state of disobedience and are, therefore, unworthy to receive communion.

I could go on with other examples, but the three passages of scripture you have just seen represent the arguments I have heard given by people in our church who believe that it is wrong to receive communion before you are baptized. Some will conclude from these passages that the Bible actually commands us to receive baptism before communion. Others will not go as far as concluding there is a mandate, but they will say that these verses and others like them establish a strong tradition that we are obliged to follow. And whether

we agree with these arguments or not, we need to understand them. If we fail to understand, it will be very difficult to love. And without love, we cannot experience unity in the Body.

What are the reasons why some Christians reject these arguments and conclude that there is neither scriptural mandate nor scriptural tradition that obliges us, as Christians, to be baptized before receiving communion? Why do some Christians believe it is not wrong to receive communion without first receiving baptism?

These Christians reject the idea that EXODUS 12:48-49 is a law that must be carried over to the New Testament. Even if circumcision represents baptism and the Passover represents communion, do Christians have to obey the ceremonial laws recorded in the Old Testament? Doesn't Christ's fulfilling of the Old Testament ceremonial laws mean that we are now free from obeying them? And even for those who argue that we must still obey the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament, there are still problems in carrying over this particular law to the New Testament. In the Old Testament, women were not required to be circumcised. The circumcision of the male served to make the whole household qualified to partake in the Passover. Does that mean that, if the male of a household is baptized, then the women of the same household can receive communion without being baptized? So, you see, there are some Christians in our church who are unconvinced that Exodus 12:48-49 proves that Christians must be baptized before they receive communion.

And some Christians also reject the argument that we must follow the same order of events recorded in ACTS 2. They note that breaking of the bread is only one of a number of things mentioned that Christians did with one another. The list also included listening to the apostles' teaching and partaking in fellowship and praying. Using the same logic, does that mean we cannot attend Sunday school classes and we cannot attend prayer meetings and we cannot attend church potlucks unless we have first been baptized?

And some Christians reject the argument that singles out not obeying the Lord's command in baptism as making a person unworthy to receive communion. The thing that makes us unworthy to receive communion is the condition of our hearts. Our unworthiness to receive communion cannot be measured by our outward compliance to the commands of God listed in the Bible. What we have done or failed to do in obeying God's commands

does not necessarily reflect the condition of our hearts. Some Christians are unaware that water baptism is a biblical mandate. Others are aware but are unable to be baptized for good reasons.

So, you see, there are some Christians in our church who do not believe it is wrong for a Christian who has not been baptized to receive communion. Some of you may totally disagree with this group of people. But whether you agree with them or not, you need to understand them. If you fail to understand, it will be very difficult to love them. And without love, we cannot experience unity in the church.

The elders have passed a rule, but does that mean all the elders believe it is wrong for a Christian who has not been baptized to receive communion? Absolutely not! Some might feel it is wrong, while others have not come to that conclusion. And does that mean we have no unity? I personally believe that we do have unity within the Elder Board of this church. But any unity we do possess within the Elder Board is not based on how much we agree with one another on this issue. It is based on how much we understand and love each other even when we disagree. True love is put to the test when there is disagreement on an issue. Husbands and wives know that all too well. True love passes the test when people say, "Even though I disagree with you, I will not condemn you for thinking it is OK for a Christian who is not baptized to receive communion. I can see that you love the Lord. I also love the Lord, so let's live and work together and not let our differences come between us." True love passes the test when people say, "Even though I disagree with you, I will not look down on you for believing that it is wrong for a Christian who has not been baptized to receive communion. I love you, and that's what matters the most. Let the world see that we are united in love."

I love and respect each one of our elders. They are not a bunch of grumpy old men who don't care about the individual needs and circumstances that exist in our congregation. They are aware that we practice a policy here at CCCNJ that forbids pastors to baptize people under 18 without consent from their parents. They are aware that this new rule makes it very difficult for people who are under 18 and want to be baptized but cannot be baptized because their parents forbid them. And if any of you fit that situation, please let Pastor Tim or me know about it, and something will be done to assure that you receive fair treatment. Being baptized and receiving communion are both Biblical mandates for Christians. The rule that was passed a week ago

Saturday is not intended to make it impossible for a Christian to obey any command given to us by Christ.

We must strive to understand the reasons why people do what they do and think the way they think. Some of the actions and thinking of people is directly connected with feelings deep down in the heart. Next week this rule will be announced in the Mandarin congregation. I am sure that some of those hearing the announcement will be happy, because they have been told for years that you are not welcome to receive communion unless you have been baptized. They will be glad that there is now an official rule that will force their children to hear the same thing being said the first Sunday of every month. I know that most of us do not have parents in the Mandarin congregation and even some of you who do have parents in the Mandarin congregation will not like the idea of being forced to do it the same way as your parents. However, we must all strive to understand the feelings of these parents. And we must respect their feelings and love them, even though we may disagree with them. It is the only way we will ever experience unity.

And, we must also understand the culture of the Chinese church. Out of the twenty-seven years I have been in full-time ministry, all but four of those years have been spent in Chinese Churches. And if you add on the two years I spent working with a church in Chinatown before I entered into full-time ministry, that adds up to a total of twenty-five years serving in Chinese churches. In all the Chinese churches I have served, with the exception of two, I have lived with the rule that a Christian must be baptized before he can receive communion. The two exceptions are the English congregation of CCCNJ before February 2003 and the large Chinese church where I served in Los Angeles before I came here. In that Chinese church, they had the rule but decided to do away with it. During the four years I served as pastor in a Caucasian church, there was no such rule. Chinese churches are complex, often consisting of two or more groups of people who have language and cultural differences. The common practice or tradition in Chinese churches is that all the groups of people in the church must do things the same way. In many Chinese churches this tradition is applied across the boards. What I mean is that each group of people must use the exact same strategies and structures for ministry as well as following the exact same rules pertaining to communion and baptism. Now our church does not demand that every congregation use the exact same strategies and

structures for ministry, but the leadership is now demanding that the exact same rules for communion and baptism be applied to all congregations. Whether you agree with this or not, you need to understand where people are coming from. This is a Chinese church.

And, what about the churches around us, the majority of which are not Chinese? Many of them do not have this rule. What should our attitude toward them be? Is it possible for us to experience Christian unity with them? It most certainly is, because Christian unity is not based on uniformity. The requirement for Christian unity is love. We must not condemn other churches just because they do not have the same rule that we now have. Even if some of us believe they are wrong, we must understand the traditions that exist in their church. Without this understanding, it is difficult to love them. And without love it is impossible to experience Christian unity.

Janiene and I started dating when we were both seventeen years of age. We were madly in love with one another. I wanted to share everything with her—even my religion. I considered my religion to be the most precious thing I had, and I wanted to share it with her. I invited her to come to mass with me. And one day I got up the courage to attend a Sunday morning service at her church. Her church was a very traditional Episcopal Church. I was brought up to believe that the Roman Catholic Church was the only true church and all other denominations were something other than true Christianity. But when I attended that Episcopal service on Easter Sunday morning, I could see little difference between what went on in my church and what went on in Janiene's church. So we began to attend one another's churches. Then came the day when we asked each other, "What is to prevent us from receiving communion in one another's churches? We were not sure the answer to that question, so I sought out a young priest and asked his opinion. He told us to let our conscience be our guide and not worry. So we began to receive communion in each other's churches.

But, the day came when an older priest found out what we were doing and told me that we were committing a very serious sin. The rule is that one must be baptized in the Roman Catholic Church before one can receive communion in the Roman Catholic Church.

It was this very issue of baptism and communion that God used to start me on a journey that would eventually lead to my salvation. I began

to ask questions and seek understanding. The more I asked, the more I realized that the leaders of the church disagreed with each other on many issues. I began to ask the all-important question, "What is truth?"

And then, in January 1972 an evangelist by the name of Josh McDowell stood up in front of a large crowd of students on the Penn State campus, held up a Bible and said, "This is truth." I was one of those students, and I was hearing those words for the very first time in my life.

I began to read the Bible. I read about the salvation offered to all people through the blood of Jesus Christ, and I asked Jesus Christ to save me and come into my life. I returned to my home church and began to serve with a completely new perspective. Knowing where to go for the answers to life's questions, I now could learn how to love people even when I disagreed with them. I could boldly stand up to the priests whom I once feared and tell them, "Even though I disagree with you, I still love you." And I could know that the words were true. Eventually the day did come when a priest told me I was no longer permitted to receive communion because of my beliefs, but even that did not stop me from loving him.

We now have a new rule at CCCNJ. You are no longer welcome to receive communion unless you have been baptized. Now all the congregations are doing it the same way. May the new rule inspire us to work at understanding each other. May our increased understanding of one another cause us to love one another. And may our love for one another be even stronger than it was before we had this new rule. If our love can be stronger, then I am sure unity will increase in our church.

Conclusion

No interpretation of these passages appears in this outline. Each person must come to his own conclusions. However, I must stress that it is possible for us to experience Christian unity even if we come to different conclusions. **Share the struggle you go through relating to people whom you disagree on this and other controversial issues in the church. Pray for God's help to understand and to love.**

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