

## THEOLOGICAL FORUM MAY 2018

### Proposed Deliverance

#### The General Assembly:

1. Receive the Report.
2. Reaffirm the Church's understanding that those who receive Communion be baptised, while recognising that church law allows the offering of Communion to an unbaptised person as part of the mission of the Church.

### Report

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

**1.1** The Theological Forum was established by the General Assembly to 'resource, express and challenge the theology that informs the life and work of the Church'. Its remit is:

- (a) To articulate and develop the doctrinal understanding of the Church in accordance with Holy Scripture and with reference to the confessional standards of the Church of Scotland;
- (b) To express the theological vision of the Church in its worship, fellowship, witness and mission in and beyond contemporary Scotland;
- (c) To respond to particular theological requests as and when these arise from the General Assembly, the Council of Assembly and the ecumenical partners of the Church;
- (d) To draw to the attention of the General Assembly theological matters which the Theological Forum considers to be of pressing contemporary relevance;
- (e) To stimulate wider theological reflection throughout the Church on key doctrinal, ethical and apologetic matters through the provision of appropriate materials and other activities.

**1.2** The Forum continues to serve this wide-ranging remit and over the last year has concentrated particularly on those issues assigned to it by the 2017 General Assembly. Its work has been carried out through substantial reading, discussion, reflection and prayer in its ten meetings, and also through extensive email communication, attendance at academic conferences and in consultation with scholars and practitioners from across the Church.

#### 2. CHILDREN AND COMMUNION

**2.1** Having been instructed at the 2017 General Assembly *"to re-examine the Church's current understanding that all children must be baptised prior to sharing in the Lord's Supper, within the context of the New Testament and the Church's*

*Confession of Faith*,” the Forum – in dialogue with the Mission and Discipleship Council – has been examining both theological and pastoral considerations around this subject. The Forum is aware that the current permissive legislation surrounding children and Communion allows for a diversity of practice across congregations in terms of whether and when children are permitted to take part in the Lord’s Supper. It is with this in mind that we here seek to explicate both the theological foundation for the normal ordering of the sacraments, as well as the important pastoral considerations that require to be prioritized when implementing this “normal order”.

**2.2** According to Act V 2000, “The Lord’s Table is open to any baptised person who loves the Lord and responds in faith to the invitation, ‘Take, eat’.”<sup>[1]</sup> This reflects what can be called the “normal order” of the sacraments, wherein baptism is to be considered a standard precondition for participation in Communion. It is worth noting the theological rationale for this ordering. As James B. Torrance has written in *Children at the Table* (produced in the early 1980s to help the Church decide on questions around children and Communion) “Christ baptises us into His Body that He might nourish us by faith.”<sup>[2]</sup> At baptism, we are welcomed into the universal Church; baptism is a “sign and seal of the covenant of grace,” a sign of our “ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins.”<sup>[3]</sup> Baptism is not about personal piety or devotion, but “signifies the action and love of God in Christ”<sup>[4]</sup>; thus, baptising children is about “recognizing the nature of grace and childlike faith, without which none can enter the Kingdom.”<sup>[5]</sup> It is thus in baptism that we recognize the inclusion of children in the Body of Christ. The Lord’s Supper is a calling and invitation for those *within* the Body of Christ to commemorate the sacrifice and work of Christ, to be fed by Him, and “to be a bond and pledge of their Communion with Him, and with each other, as members of His mystical body.”<sup>[6]</sup> There is a clear theological logic and order to the sequence of the sacraments.

**2.3** When it comes to the question of actual admission to the Lord’s Supper, Church of Scotland law and practice allows for the discretion of Kirk Sessions. Hence, while Section 13 of Act V 2000 states that a “Kirk Session is obliged to test the response in faith of a baptised person before authorising admission to the Lord’s Table,”<sup>[7]</sup> the Act also contains the following provision: “*Notwithstanding* the terms of Section 13...where a Kirk Session is satisfied that baptised children are being nurtured within the life and worship of the

Church and love the Lord and respond in faith to the invitation, ‘take, eat’, it may admit such children to the Lord’s Table, after pastorally overseeing the response of faith of such children to see when it is right for them to come to the Lord’s Table.”<sup>[8]</sup> The Forum would wish to emphasise the permissive nature of this legislation. That is, Kirk Sessions are *not* required to *test* the faith of children in order for them to participate in the Lord’s Supper, so long as they are assured that the pastoral care and education of such children are being attended to. This is not to be considered “indiscriminate celebration” of the Lord’s Supper; as James Torrance writes, a child’s faith “may be as a grain of mustard seed, and understanding minimal, but where a child can hear and understand something of the meaning of the words, ‘Take, eat...’, who can forbid him?”<sup>[9]</sup>

**2.4** The question here arises: What about unbaptised children (or adults)? Should they be permitted to participate in the Lord’s Supper? While the Forum would wish to emphasise once again that the normal order is for baptism to precede Communion, we also recognise the importance of pastoral considerations in such cases. There is real spiritual value in the act of seeking to participate in the Lord’s Supper, to be nourished by Christ – whether or not the person is baptised. To turn away one who seeks to be fed by Christ could be to do real damage to the one who seeks. It is with this in mind that the Forum agrees with James Torrance’s thoughts on this question:

It may on certain occasions mean that an unbaptised child (or adult) may seek to receive Christ in communion. Again we must not withhold bread and wine from such a child (or adult) but go on to show him or her that the Christ whom we receive in bread and wine calls us unconditionally to baptism. But any such reversal of the order of baptism and the Lord’s Supper could never become the norm, though may occasionally be inevitable in the mission of the Church.<sup>[10]</sup>

**2.5** In other words, the normal ordering of the sacraments should never be reversed or ignored, but this normal ordering need by no means mean that unbaptised persons should be turned away from the Table. Rather, such persons should be welcomed to the Lord’s Supper, and subsequently encouraged to seek baptism and further instruction in the life of the Church. It is hoped that such subsequent encouragement would not be seen as anomalous

– for such instruction should already be a component of the life of the Church.

**2.6** Indeed, this question regarding unbaptised children may present a real opportunity. Admitting unbaptised children to the Lord’s Supper should not be seen as a softening of theological standards, but rather as the appropriate theological and pastoral response to one who seeks to be nourished by Christ. This being said, such situations remind us of the importance of offering ongoing instruction and education for both children and adults. Nurturing young lives in the faith and practice of the Church, as well as offering opportunities to make professions of faith, should be considered a necessary component of congregational life. The development of creative, instructive, and grace-filled pathways for the spiritual development of children should be a key focus for the Church. When such pathways are available, the question of unbaptised children and the Lord’s Supper becomes less seemingly problematic: the congregation can simultaneously affirm the unbaptised child’s hunger for Christ, *and* subsequently extend an invitation to the child (and his or her family) to pursue instruction and participation in congregational life and baptism.

### **3. ECUMENICAL FEEDBACK**

**3.1** Following the decision of the 2017 General Assembly, under the Report of the Theological Forum, to: *“Instruct the Ecumenical Relations Committee to invite comment and feedback from our ecumenical partners and report to the General Assembly of 2018,”* the Forum has received a number of responses thus far, and would like to thank the Archbishops’ Council of the Church of England, the Doctrine Committee of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, the Doctrine Committee of the Scottish Episcopal Church, the General Meeting for Scotland of Quakers in Scotland, the United Reformed Church’s National Synod of Scotland, the Conference of European Churches and The Salvation Army for their comment and feedback to *An Approach to the Theology of Same-Sex Marriage*.

**3.2** The Forum is grateful for the prayerful and constructive responses of its ecumenical partners, and is encouraged by the willingness shown to explore together issues surrounding same-sex marriage. While recognising profound theological concerns expressed with regards to certain sections and conclusions of the 2017 Report, the

Forum is heartened to hear that its Report has been of help to those denominations engaged in similar discussions. The Forum will take this diversity forward into its future thinking on reconciliation, as it continues to learn from and with its ecumenical partners.

### **4. RECONCILIATION**

**4.1** The Forum was grateful to receive the following deliverance at the 2017 General Assembly: *“Urge the Forum, in consultation with other Councils, to investigate theologically the theme of reconciliation, with particular reference to the divisions within the Church of Scotland, Scottish churches and Scottish society concerning same-sex marriage.”* The Forum has begun to consider a number of aspects of reconciliation found in scripture, theology and experience: as a Trinitarian theme; in God’s divine initiative of reconciliation with humanity; in human relationships at personal and corporate levels. The Forum’s thinking recognises connections between reconciliation and forgiveness, truth and justice, again at personal and corporate levels. Furthermore, the Forum is mindful of the context expressed in the remit, and is reflecting on the nature of disagreement, division and reconciliation within the Church at this time. Thus far, conversation partners have included theologians in print and in person, and descriptions of processes of reconciliation – all the while listening to each other in our diversity.

**4.2** The Forum looks forward to developing these initial paths of enquiry further in consultation with others in the Church before a final report is delivered.

### **5. SACRAMENTAL MINISTRY**

Three members of the Forum have joined the Panel on Review and Reform’s Sacramental Ministry Working Group, which was established in line with the following instruction received at the 2017 General Assembly: *“Instruct the Panel, the Theological Forum, the Ecumenical Relations Committee and the Legal Questions Committee jointly to give consideration to whether, in the light of the ideas raised in the Report and Supplementary Report of the Panel on Review and Reform, there should be any change to the practice of Sacramental Ministry in the Church of Scotland and to consult with others and to report to a future Assembly.”* Representatives from the Forum have attended the Working Group’s meetings to date, and their involvement has been enriched by the Forum’s collective consideration of the doctrines of ordination and the

sacraments. The Forum looks forward to contributing further to this work throughout the year to come.

## 6. FUTURE WORK

Much of the Forum's work over the next year will continue to focus on the theme of reconciliation. The Forum has also committed to continuing its work with the Mission and Discipleship Council and the Panel on Review and Reform on the issues detailed above. Future work is anticipated on ecclesiological questions of oversight with the Ministries Council and the Ecumenical Relations Committee. The Forum stands ready to assist the General Assembly and its Councils and Committees in any matter of theology and doctrine and would welcome consultation at an early stage in any significant pieces of theological work.

## 7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Forum is grateful to all those who have sought its views and listened so graciously to its comments. The Forum would also like to express its thanks to those who have shared their expansive knowledge and experience of conflict mediation and theologies of reconciliation. The Forum is grateful to the Rev Dr Ken Jeffrey, who is due to retire from membership at the General Assembly, and values the hard work, commitment and contribution of each of its members.

*In the name of the Theological Forum*

DONALD MacEWAN, *Convener*  
SARAH LANE RITCHIE, *Vice-Convener*  
NATHALIE MARES, *Secretary*

## References

- [1] Act V.12, 'Consolidating Act Anent The Sacraments.' Edinburgh, 20<sup>th</sup> May 2000. [http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0003/1839/2000\\_act\\_05.pdf](http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/1839/2000_act_05.pdf)
- [2] James B. Torrance, "Some Theological Grounds for Admitting Children to the Lord's Table," in *Children at the Table*, ed. David G. Hamilton and Finlay A. J. Macdonald, (Edinburgh: The Church of Scotland, 1982), p.6
- [3] Westminster Confession of Faith, xxviii.1
- [4] Act V.3
- [5] Torrance, 6
- [6] Westminster Confession of Faith, xxix.1
- [7] Act V.13
- [8] Act V.15 (Emphasis added)
- [9] Torrance, 6
- [10] Torrance, 6