

A resource for all, explaining why we encourage children to come to the Lord's Table

Baptized Children and the Lord's Table 1988

The Commission on Theology Report to the 1988 General Synod of the RCA

The Commission on Theology has studied the 1977 and 1984 papers and the issues referred to it by subsequent actions of the General Synod. The present Commission on Theology agrees with past commissions and concludes that the proposal to include baptized children at the Lord's Table is fully consonant with the reformed doctrines of baptism and the Lord's Supper and the work of the Holy Spirit, and that no serious impediments to the proposal emerge from biblical, historical, or theological grounds. Further, the present commission urges the General Synod this year to consider the selected salient biblical, historical, and theological data as itemized below; and to adopt the appended recommendations.

1. The decision to include baptized children at the Lord's Table is grounded in the reformed view of baptism, which has its roots in the biblical concepts of the covenant and church, and also grounded in the nature of the Lord's Table and in the work of the Holy Spirit. Baptism is the sign and seal of a continuing life in Christ through the Holy Spirit within the body of Christ. Children of believers as well as individual adult believers are heirs of the kingdom and members of the body of Christ (Gen. 18:19; Deut. 6:7; Mark 10:13f.; Acts 2:39; I Cor. 7:14).
2. The covenant – initiated by God with Abraham, maintained with faithfulness to Israel, and envisaged by the prophets to be renewed to include all the families of the earth – provides the key to the understanding of the church as the covenant people of God today (Gen. 12:1-3; 13:15; 15:13; 17:7-14; Jer. 31:31-34; Matt. 26:28; Rom. 11:17-24; Gal. 3:7-14, 26-29; Eph. 2:11-12; Heb. 8:8-13; Heidelberg Catechism, q. 74).
3. Baptism is a means of grace whereby God is pleased to incorporate us into the covenant of grace with God's people. To be introduced into the covenant is to be introduced into Christ and the blessing of the Holy Spirit (I Cor. 6:17; 12:13; H Cor. 3:17-18).
4. Based on the foregoing Scriptures, the baptized gain a growing sense of identity as children of God, an increasing awareness of their privileges and responsibilities, as well as an increasing assurance that grounds their hope of eternal life. This growing life in Christ is the work of the Holy Spirit who nurtures us through word and sacrament in communion with God's people.
5. Belgic Confession Article 34 and Heidelberg Catechism Question 74 (cf. also qq. 69, 70, 73) affirm with strong statements that children are through baptism members of the church because they are included in God's covenant of grace and all its benefits.
6. This affirmation recognizes God's active presence in a baptized child's life. The complementary affirmation is that personal faith, expressed increasingly in a person's developing life, demonstrates trust in God. Both must be affirmed. Taken alone, the former leads to baptismal regeneration, a doctrine which reformed theology has consistently rejected. Taken alone, the latter leads to works of righteousness, which reformed theology has also consistently rejected. Taken together, however, baptism and profession of faith jointly recognize the grace of God throughout the Christian life.

7. Baptized children, like all of us, have begun a journey. Along the way and at the journey's end, they and we require the blessing of the Holy Spirit in the hearing of the Word of God, the sacrament of the Lord's Table, and the affection and nurture of the Christian community. In baptism, God wills that baptized children shall be led by the Holy Spirit to appropriate all of God's promises and to affirm the knowledge of God's grace in their own public confessions of faith. Such is the faith expressed by the Apostle Paul: "I press on, to make it my own, because Jesus Christ has made me his own" (Phil. 3:12). Indeed, the church must provide the most sound and comprehensive program of nurture and education possible in order that the church's children will make public profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.
8. However, nothing in the Scriptures, in reformed theology, or in the early history of the church requires such a confession of faith to be a prerequisite to participation in the Lord's Supper. Rather, the Lord's Supper is understood as a means of grace for nourishing and strengthening us to eternal life, righteousness, and glory. God grants to covenant children in the Supper the infinite goodness of our Savior and makes us all to be partakers of all God's blessings (cf. Liturgy and Psalms, p. 64). As such, the Supper must surely not be considered as the goal for baptized children. It is not a reward for making confession of faith. Rather, the sacrament is a means of grace that properly leads one to public confession of faith. We do not withhold food and drink from our children until they are old enough to say they need it. On the contrary, the food and drink provided for them are among the means by which our children grow to maturity. Belgic Confession Article 35 (cf. also Canons of Dort, v. 14) clearly presents this nurturing and covenantal view of the Lord's Supper:

We believe and confess that our Savior Jesus Christ has ordained and instituted the Sacrament of the Holy Supper, to nourish and strengthen those whom he has already made alive and members of his family, which is the Church.... Now, as it is sure and beyond doubt that Jesus Christ did not enjoin us the use of his Sacraments in vain, so he works in us all that he represents to us through these holy signs, though the manner passes our understanding, and cannot be comprehended by us, as the operations of the Holy Ghost are hidden and incomprehensible.

9. Throughout the early history of the church, the Holy Supper was understood as a means of grace to nurture the children of the church. After 1,200 years, and then only in the Latin West, the Roman Catholic Church excluded children from the Table. This was done for two reasons. First, the bishop alone, it was believed, could "confirm" a person making a profession of faith, and the practice was declared to be a sacrament. Thus, a step-by-step sacramental sequence was established: baptism, confirmation, then the Lord's Table, and the other sacraments. Even after this action children were not immediately excluded. A second action combined with the first to change the practice gradually. The Fourth Lateran Council, A.D. 1215, defined the doctrine of transubstantiation in which the elements of the Holy Supper were regarded as too holy to be handled by any except a consecrated brother, priest, or bishop. So, children were excluded lest they "slaver" and desecrate the holy elements. For the same reason, the cup was withheld from lay Christians.

Reformed Christians do not believe in transubstantiation, but in the spiritual presence of Christ in the sacrament of the Table. Neither do we believe in confirmation as a sacrament. Nor is there any necessity for the individual's public confession of faith, essential though it be, to be a precondition for participation in the Lord's Supper.

10. Some object that the nature of the Supper and the caution not to eat unworthily in I Corinthians 11:27-29 require a more mature discernment than young children can attain. This view is based on the idea that "discerning the body" means an intellectual, rational grasp of the doctrines of salvation and the symbols of the Table. But Paul's argument in I Corinthians 11 offers a different understanding of the phrase. When the Corinthians

gathered to eat, "each one goes ahead with his own meal, and one is hungry and another is drunk" (I Cor. 11:21). The context is divisiveness in the church. What was not being discerned through insensitive and exclusive behavior was the corporate character of the "body of Christ," the church. What was being broken was the communal nature of the Supper. Participation of baptized children at the Lord's Table is another effort not to eat unworthily. By including baptized children we are properly "discerning the body of Christ": the church in its fullness.

The participation of children at the Lord's Table before public confession of their faith was a standard practice in the early church. Our own theological tradition nearly a hundred years ago demonstrates a congruence with the practice in the Children's Catechism approved by the General Synod of 1889:

What is the duty of the child?

It is the duty of a baptized child to worship God and to come to the Lord's Supper as soon as he is drawn to it by love for the Savior.

11. The RCA should not understand Paul's cautionary words of "discerning the body" (I Cor. 11:29) to mean the disqualifying of anyone of any age, even and perhaps especially a child, who believes in or loves the Savior and trusts the Lord alone for salvation. One need not be perfect morally, spiritually, or intellectually in order to benefit from the Supper. Indeed, as Calvin's Geneva Catechism makes clear, precisely because we are not perfect, all believers need to come to the Table.

But is it necessary to have perfect faith and charity?

Both should be entire and unfeigned, but to have such a perfection, from which nothing is wanting, will not be found among man. Moreover, the Supper would have been instituted in vain if no one could receive it unless he were entirely perfect.... It is an aid and support for our weakness....

12. What is required of anyone to partake of the Lord's Supper is faith in and love for the Savior, ability to experience the Savior's love expressed in the bread and the cup, and the sense of belonging to the covenant community. The believing and discerning of the child can be as fully authentic as that of the adult, but the believing and discerning will be at the level appropriate to the child's age. Children can show the kind of love, trust, and thankfulness appropriate to their place in the family of God. They can love Jesus and experience Jesus' love in return. We are reminded of Jesus' words, "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 19:14). They can be loved by parents, friends, and other members of the body of Christ who have taken responsibility for their nurture as children in the church. They can commit themselves meaningfully to Christ and obey and serve their Lord. Indeed, current research in cognitive development affirms the importance of the church's sacramental life for nurturing children in the faith.
13. Where does responsibility rest for the nurture and instruction of baptized children as they participate in the Lord's Supper? It rests on the believing parent(s), on the Christian education program of the local church, and with the board of elders of each congregation. Pastors serve as an important resource for constructing and implementing a program of pastoral care and fostering a congregational climate that encourages appropriate spiritual life for all members of the body of Christ.
14. Grounded thus in the nature of baptism and of the Lord's Supper, and in reliance on the work of the Holy Spirit who makes alive and leads to fullness of life in Christ, the commission commends the practice of including baptized children at the Lord's Table.

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Baptized children are welcomed to the Lord Table because they are members of the church and thereby fitting recipients of the grace which God makes available to the covenant community through word and sacrament. In the Reformed tradition, baptism is regarded as a sign and seal of incorporation into the body of Christ. Children are to be baptized because they, no less than their parents, have been promised "the forgiveness of sins through Christ's blood and the Holy Spirit who gives faith." (Heidelberg Catechism, Question 74). There are no second class citizens of the covenant community. It must be recognized, however, that baptized children have only begun their spiritual journeys. As they walk longer with Christ they gain a clearer sense of identity as God's children, grow in an awareness of privileges, responsibilities, and assurance that grounds their hope in eternal life. This growing life in Christ is the work of the Holy Spirit who nurtures us in communion with God's people. While the church affirms that baptism is a gift of grace and that God is actively present in a baptized child's life, it also affirms that personal faith, expressed in a developing Christian life, demonstrates a response of trust in God. Faith is a gift of grace which seeks expression and commitment. Baptism expresses God's desire that children be led by the power of the Holy Spirit to appropriate all of God's promises and to affirm, in their own public confessions of faith, the knowledge and experience of God's grace.

While a public confession of faith is to be expected of baptized children of the covenant, nothing in the Scriptures, in Reformed theology, or in the early history of the church requires such a confession as a prerequisite for participation in the Lord's Supper. Rather the Lord's Supper, like baptism, is considered a means of grace for nourishing and strengthening us to eternal life and righteousness. Through the ages the church has maintained that baptism needs to be followed by the Lord's Supper even as birth needs to be followed by care and nurture. While the two sacraments, by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, are closely linked, each has its own purpose. Baptism signifies incorporation into Christ, the Supper nurtures and strengthens us in Christ. The Supper is not a goal for baptized children, not a reward for making public confession of faith, but a means of grace that leads one to that confession. Baptized children, therefore, should be encouraged to participate in the Supper of grace. Just as we provide food and drink for our children, so God provides the spiritual food set upon the Lord's Table.

Who, then, shall be welcomed to the Lord's Table? All baptized believers who seek to be nourished and strengthened through Christ's covenantal grace. What is required for partaking of the Lord's Supper is faith and love for the Savior, ability to experience the grace of Christ expressed in the bread and the cup, and the sense of belonging to the covenant community. The faith of a child can be as authentic as that of an adult, though expressed at a level appropriate to the child's development. Children can show the kind of love, trust, and thankfulness appropriate to their place in the family of God. They can love Jesus and experience his love in return just as they can love and be loved by parents and friends. As baptized members of the body of Christ, children belong at the Table of our Lord. Jesus has issued the invitation: "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the Kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 19:14).