

Children and the Lord's Table – A resource for parents

PROMISE AND COVENANT GOD SURELY KEEPS

A resource for parents/guardians about Children and the Lord's Table
www.rca.org/resources/promise-and-covenant-god-surely-keeps

This resource is to help parents/guardians talk to children about the Lord's Table. It also answers questions adults have about bringing children to the Lord's Table.

Here you will read what it means when we confess that baptized children, as well as their parents, are included in the covenant and belong to the people of God (Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 74).

The Church Welcomes Children at the Baptismal Font

We are people of God; people of promise and covenant.

God promised to make a covenant with Abram: "I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you" (Genesis 17:7).

God's promise to Abram extends beyond his blood offspring: "For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him" (Acts 2:39).

We whom God has called through our baptism into Christ are descendants of Abram. Thus, God chooses to bless the earth through us: "And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:29).

With our children, we are not our own. We belong to God. We are members of God's covenant family. As members of that family, we are brothers and sisters who need to be loved, to be taught, to act as members of a family ought to act; and we all need to eat and drink together to be nourished and to grow.

The Church Welcomes Children to the Lord's Table

Although Jesus' followers tried to keep children away from him, Jesus welcomed children to himself with open arms. He said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs" (Luke 18:16).

Your church invites children to the Lord's Table, the feast of the new covenant.

In 1988, the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, "encourage[d] boards of elders of Reformed Church in America (RCA) congregations to include baptized children at the Lord's Table." (*Note: The General Synod is the highest decision-making body of the Reformed Church in America.*)

In its action, the General Synod reaffirmed the 1889 Children's Catechism of the Reformed Church in America, which defined the duty of baptized children: "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."

Still, practical matters and questions arise.

- What if I can't answer my children's hard questions?
- How much can my children really understand?
- Whatever happened to "confirmation"?
- I can't get my children to sit still!

My Children Ask Hard Questions

If your child asks you a question about faith and you're not sure of the answer, it's all right to say, "Well, I'm not sure. What do you think?" Often with children, the relationship is more important than the right answer.

Encourage your child to ask the hard questions. Their inquisitive spirit gives you the opportunity to share your faith with them. Listen carefully to the questions they are asking, and respond to them with clear language.

For example, if a child asks, "Why do we sometimes eat bread and drink wine (or grape juice) in church?" it may be enough to say, "Because Jesus told his followers and friends to do it, and because Jesus is with us when we eat and drink together."

Of course, you can always encourage your children to speak with an elder, a pastor, a Sunday school teacher, or another respected adult about their questions.

How Much Can My Children Really Understand?

Who can fully explain what happens at the Lord's Table? As parents we do not ask that our children understand how the body processes food before we feed them. As a church we do not demand that children have an understanding of how Christ feeds their spirits at the Lord's Supper.

Early on children begin to learn right from wrong. Children know when a relationship is broken and when it is whole. They know what it means to say they are sorry. And they know what it means to try to do better next time.

They also understand what it means to be a member of a family. They know that no one should be excluded from the family table.

In the Belgic Confession (Article 35), the Reformed Church in America confesses that "...our Savior Jesus Christ has ordained and instituted the Sacrament of the Holy Supper, to nourish and sustain those whom he has [already made alive and members of his family], which is his Church."

The well-known Christian author, C. S. Lewis, was once asked why he had never written about the Lord's Supper. He replied that our Lord said "Take and eat." Jesus did not say "Take and explain." It is enough, as a beginning, to know that Jesus gave the loaf and the cup to his followers as expressions of love.

Our understanding of the Lord's Table (and of many things) changes through the years. Communion is many things and these things have different importance for us at different times. Children may be just beginning to understand what happens at the Lord's Table. But whatever our age, we can always learn more.

Whatever Happened to "Confirmation"?

Although we sometimes use the word "confirmation" to speak of a process that children participate in when they are in adolescence, the Reformed Church in America does not actually practice confirmation. Instead, we have encouraged children to confess (or profess) their faith when they are old enough to make serious commitments.

But confirmation (or confession of faith) does not make us members of God's family. We are members of the covenant family through baptism (Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 74). We did not become a member of our family when we could spell our names or recite the names of a dozen relatives. We became a member when we were born. The other things came later. Likewise, we become a member of the church when we are baptized, not when we can say what being a Christian means. We spend the rest of our lives working on what that means.

We confess our faith often. We confess our faith by attending worship. We confess our faith whenever we sing or say one of the church's creeds. We confess our faith when in our daily lives we make choices based on God's guidance.

And one day your child will have an opportunity to stand before the elders and the congregation to profess her or his faith, a faith that has been strengthened by God at the Lord's Table

But I Can't Get My Child to Sit Still In Church!

This can be embarrassing. But it usually does not last for very long. And there are some ways for you to help keep it from happening. Following are some suggestions:

- When you come to worship, bring something quiet for your child to do (stuffed animal, cloth book, a mini-clipboard for drawing and/or activity pages, crayons, stickers).
- Practice Communion manners at home.
- Help your children get ready on Sunday morning by setting a non-anxious tone yourself.
- Encourage participation in worship. Some congregations provide worship bags for children and/or a children's bulletin. At home, teach the songs (Doxology, Communion hymn, etc.) and prayers/responses/litanies (Lord's Prayer) that are used repeatedly.

All of this is hard work, but joyful work! And remember, in doing it you are fulfilling the sacred promise you made at your child's baptism to bring him or her up in the nurture of the church and its worship.

What Should I Do Next?

Engage all your powers of parental sensitivity, and when the time is right:

- Encourage your child to keep asking questions.
- Ask for help when your child asks "hard" questions.
- Remind your child that he or she is a member of God's family.
- Remind your child that baptism is about God's promise.
- Talk to your child about the importance of keeping promises, and reassure him or her that God always keeps God's promises.
- Celebrate the day of your child's baptism, as well as your child's birthday.
- Talk about the Lord's Table when you are seated at your family table.
- Teach your child that just as Jesus died for her or him, Jesus welcomes your child to the Lord's Table.
- Talk with your child about feeling sorry, about asking God and others for forgiveness, about being forgiven, and about doing better next time.
- Model "Lord's Table" manners.

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Adapted for use in Reformed Church in America congregations by Paul Janssen. Edited by Willa Brown and Jane Schuyler. Adapted from Children of the Covenant: A Book for Adults about Children and Communion, by Glenn Cooper, The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1997. Used by permission.