

Children at the Table: Toward a Guiding Principle for Biblically Faithful Celebrations of the Lord's Supper

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A Summary of the Report to Synod 2010

Key Ideas

The Lord's Supper is a gracious gift of God that sustains and nourishes our faith. In response to our mandate to study the role of children at the Lord's Supper, this document proposes the following principle:

“All baptized members are welcome to the Lord's Supper for age- and ability-appropriate obedience to biblical commands about participation, under the supervision of the elders. The elders have responsibility to nurture grateful and obedient participation by providing encouragement, instruction, and accountability in the congregation. Requiring a formal public profession of faith prior to participation the Lord's Supper is one pastoral approach to consider, but is not required by scripture or the confessions.”

This approach, which is different from both the standard case for and the standard case against welcoming young children to the table, is developed out of the following convictions:

1. All baptized persons, regardless of age, are members of the church. Church membership comes not upon profession of faith, but upon baptism.
2. We are invited to the table out of sheer grace as members of God's covenant people, and not because of our profession of faith or our level of comprehension.
3. When we are invited, each participant is called to age- and ability-appropriate obedience of biblical commands about participation at the Lord's Supper.
4. We must learn to see the commands about participation in the Lord's Supper as life-giving gifts, not onerous burdens.
5. I Corinthians 11:17-34, is especially significant for understanding faithful participation in the Lord's Supper, inhospitality and calls for greater unity in the body of Christ. The text is not primarily concerned about children's participation, but rather focuses on unrepentant or inhospitable adults. At the same time, the text has implications for all participants at the table.
6. The elders of a congregation have responsibility for cultivating both the gracious invitation to the table and obedient participation at the table.
7. At times, discussions about the Lord's Supper have slipped into one of two opposing errors:
 - a) focusing too much on achieving a level of cognitive understanding prior to participation, and

b) minimizing the importance of theological reflection and learning about deeper participation. Calling for “age- and ability- appropriate participation” addresses both problems at once, resisting the idea that children need to arrive at a certain level of comprehension before partaking and resisting the kind of unthinking participation that can set in over time for any worshiper.

8. Requiring a public profession of faith before participation in the Lord’s Supper is a wise pastoral practice in some circumstances, but it is not a biblically mandated nor confessionally required practice. Each church council should promote age- and ability-appropriate obedience at the table, as described in the Bible and in the Reformed confessions, and may choose to require public profession of faith if appropriate.

9. This approach commends common criteria and a complementary set of practices for welcoming children to the table. The common principle and common criteria proposed below promise to help us resist congregationalism, even though our practices may vary according to culture and ministry context.

The Key Passage

Before assessing specific arguments for or against children at the table, we pause for an extended study of one text, I Cor. 11:17-34. This text is one of the few texts that provides specific guidance about the practice of the Lord’s Supper, and it is the single most important text in discussions of children at the Lord’s Supper.

Though there are certainly many areas of disagreement about this text, we are grateful that there is a strong consensus among biblical scholars about its main theme: confronting inhospitality and favoritism in the Lord’s Supper. We also note that this consensus view is hardly benign. It offers much to challenge, correct, and inspire us all.

One central theme of I Corinthians as a whole is the breakdown of community, unity, and fellowship in the Christian church, and I Cor. 11:17-34 deals with one facet of this central theme. Paul is writing to protest favoritism and inhospitality at the Lord’s Table, a breakdown of the Christian community along sociological lines. He is specifically concerned with those who “show contempt for the church” and “humiliate those who have nothing” (vs. 22). When Paul says, “I hear that there may be divisions among you” (11:18), he is tying this part of the book into the broader theme of unity that he stresses in 1:10 (“I appeal to you. . . that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought”), and in the preceding and subsequent context of chapter 11 (10:16-17 and 12:12-13). The specific issue in I Corinthians 11:17-34 involves Lord’s Supper practices that were inhospitable and divisive

In dealing with this situation, Paul outlines some principles for participation at the table that transcend the specific situation: each participant must carefully assess their relationship to others who are coming to the table, set aside all arrogance, inhospitality, and self-centeredness, and wait for, welcome, and receive one another in the celebration itself (see vs. 33).

CHILDREN AT THE TABLE

There are two basic positions in the CRC that can be readily identified.

First, those who argue for children at the table typically develop several of the following arguments:

- 1) the Bible nowhere explicitly bars children from participation at the table,
- 2) children are clearly part of the covenant community,
- 3) children participated in the Passover (Ex. 12:26), the covenant feast that was transformed by Jesus into the Lord's Supper, and
- 4) evidence suggests that children participated in the Lord's Supper in the early church.

Second, those who respond by arguing that baptized children should not partake stress:

- 1) that there is no biblical text that explicitly warrants the inclusion of children at the table,
- 2) that there is no proof that children participated in the Passover,
- 3) that I Cor. 11 clearly requires each participant to engage in certain actions, and
- 4) that baptism and the Lord's Supper are two quite different sacraments, with baptism being more passive, and the Lord's Supper being more active.

Profession of Faith

For many Reformed Christians over the past 450 years, public profession of faith has been a rich and vital practice, a time of gratitude for God's work, an occasion for deepened commitment to the faith, and an occasion for recognizing the joyful and serious obligations of participation in the church. As a committee, we are eager to renew and deepen public profession of faith as a significant milestone event in the lives of believers.

Profession of faith is a time to celebrate and affirm baptismal identity. For those baptized as infants, profession of faith is a time to affirm covenant promises. For those baptized as adults, profession of faith accompanies baptism and affirms that our identity is found in Jesus Christ.

We acknowledge, however, that several contemporary factors have also eroded this practice, including the extension of adolescence as a distinct stage in one's life cycle, the reluctance of some churches to impose any expectation of a formal profession of faith, lack of clarity about the missional character of profession of faith, and—for some—prolonged periods of formal education at a distance from a young person's congregational home.

These factors, however, do not offer grounds for setting aside this practice, but only for becoming more intentional about it. Congregations that offer warm, personal invitations to each

child and young person to explore making profession of faith by probing their doubts and questions, developing Christian practices of Bible study and prayer, and discerning their gifts for service will have served them well.

Since the Reformation, profession of faith has also been a requirement for participation at the table in many Reformed and Presbyterian churches. The sixteenth century Reformers in the Reformed tradition replaced medieval confirmation with profession of faith. Profession of faith was closely linked with both baptism and catechesis. Children ages 10-14 were invited and expected to testify to their faith and to recite answers to catechism questions which explored their faith prior to participation at the Lord's Table.

However, we also observe that public profession of faith is neither biblically nor confessionally mandated. It is one pastoral strategy to promote discipleship and to provide accountability regarding table participation. And the requirement does have some disadvantages. For one, this requiring profession of faith before table participation can unwittingly reinforce the perception that infant and young children are not members of the church. In these circumstances, profession of faith replaces baptism in the perception of many as the entrance requirement into the church, in opposition to the confessions (See Belgic Confession, art. 34) For another, it can suggest that participation at the table requires not only age-appropriate obedience to the biblical commands about participation, but also assent to the particular doctrinal formulations.

Points of Agreement and Consensus

That brings us to our current assessment of this material. We offer the following two claims on the basis of this study. Further, on the basis of conversations across the CRC, we sense that these two claims could be widely embraced.

1. Baptized children are members of the church, the body of Christ who are welcomed to the table on the basis not of their comprehension or profession but on the basis of God's gracious invitation to the covenant community.
2. Each participant in the Lord's Supper should participate actively, in obedience to each biblical imperatives.

An Additional Consideration: Age- and Ability- Appropriate Obedience

In addition, our committee wishes to add one additional, but significant consideration: a simple comparison of how we approach the obedience of children to various biblical commands. Just as we encourage very young children to begin obeying commands to pray to God and to not steal or lie, so too, we invite young children to engage in age- and ability-appropriate ways of participating at the Lord's Table.

This “age-appropriate and ability-appropriate” argument is already practiced by the church. We gratefully observe that congregations regularly welcome baptized persons with cognitive disabilities to the table as members of the covenant who participate according to their ability. Further, the church regularly welcomes persons with dementia to the table, long after they have the capacities they once did to examine themselves and discern the body. It welcomes them to obey “in an ability-appropriate” way. As a committee, we want to strongly affirm the practice of welcoming persons with cognitive disabilities and dementia to partake of the Lord’s Supper in precisely this way, namely, by obeying all the imperatives in an “ability appropriate way.”

This position challenges the notion that children are not capable of self-examination and discernment. Even very young children engage in the practices commended in I Cor. 11, as they express with heartfelt sincerity “I’m sorry,” “I love Jesus,” “this is God’s family,” “this is God’s feast.”

Three Complementary Models

Our committee is aware of three basic models that have the potential to meet the principle and common criteria we have proposed. We offer basic descriptions here, and some initial observations about them. We look forward to receiving feedback on these models.

MODEL 1: INVITATION IS OFFERED IN WORSHIP

One approach would be for a congregation to simply convey in the context of the Lord’s Supper celebration the principle we have described. A pastor might say, “The Lord’s Supper is a gracious gift that God has provided to Christ’s body, the church. All members of Christ’s body are invited to participate as an act of faith, and to come to the table of the Lord discerning that this bread and cup are signs and seals of God’s love for us and discerning that we who participate are members of Christ and each other.”

MODEL 2: THROUGH PUBLIC PROFESSION OF FAITH

Some congregations may judge that requiring a formal, public profession of faith before participation in the Lord’s Supper remains the best pastoral way to encourage faith-filled, age-appropriate participation.

MODEL 3: THROUGH A “WELCOME TO THE TABLE” PROCESS

A third model involves a process whereby the church invites young, baptized members of the church to learn about the Lord’s Supper, to express their desire to participate in faith in an age-appropriate way, and then to celebrate the milestone of their first participation. As with profession of faith, this may be done with a group of children or by individual children. The

process may involve a Sunday school teacher, an elder, parents, and pastors in appropriate ways. It could be as simple as a conversation between the child and the pastor, or it may be more complex, including several Sunday School lessons.

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Some Questions for Discussion

1. How do you respond to the claim that I Corinthians 11:17-34 is more about inhospitable and divisive behavior in the church than about setting guidelines about how much we must understand before we can come to the Lord's Table?
2. Reflect on those within your congregation who have been baptized but have not made profession of faith. Do you think they believe that they are a member of the church, or not? What might communicate to them that they are not? What might communicate to them that they are a member?
3. Reflect on and attempt to describe what you think "age-appropriate participation" might be for an elementary school child of your congregation who comes to the Lord's Table.
4. What are the Elders of a congregation able to do that cultivates a spirit of gracious hospitality and joyful participation in the Lord's Supper? Make a list. Then evaluate your work on the basis of that list.
5. How vital and meaningful is the practice of Public Profession of Faith in your congregation? At what age do children and youth seek to make it? Are there things you could do to make it more meaningful and celebratory?
6. Review the Three Complementary Models at the end of this report. Which one characterizes the practices of your congregation? Are your practices as healthy as they could be?