

Baptized Children at the Lord's Table

RCA Theological Commission, 1990

Baptized children are welcomed to the Lord's 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, Q 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 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 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 profession 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 up on 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" (Matthew 19:14).

Suggested Procedural Guidelines for Elder Boards

The Book of Church Order (BCO) gives to the elders of the church responsibility for the spiritual care of its members and responsibility to see that its members are making faithful use of the means of grace. In furtherance of these responsibilities, boards of elders are encouraged to implement the following procedures for children at the Lord's Supper.

- When parents and a baptized child of the church come to the board of elders requesting that the child be allowed to participate in the Supper, then the elders may proceed as follows:
 - An elder (perhaps with the pastor or another elder) may call on the family in the home. During the course of the visit, the elder should seek to guide the conversation through an explanation of the Supper and an exploration of the child's faith. Attention given to the following is suggested:
 - Explanation of the Supper at a level the child will be able to understand
 - Discussion of the child's participation in the life of the church and the meaning of membership in Christ's body
 - Exploration of the child's faith
 - For pre-elementary and early-elementary children, such questions as "Do you know Jesus died for you because he loves you?" and "Do you love Jesus?" may be used.
 - For upper-elementary and older children, the substance of the questions and answers from "The Heidelberg Catechism," numbers 65-80, may be used (see pg # in this booklet)
 - Encouragement of questions from the child and from the parents
 - Encouragement of further family discussion before and after each celebration of the Supper
 - Leaving the family some educational material
 - Following a satisfactory home visit, the elders may bring a recommendation to the board of elders for approval
 - Following the board of elders' approval, the elder may then inform the child and the family that the child is welcome at the next celebration of the Lord's Supper. Although some form of recognition may be appropriate, a formal welcoming ceremony or announcement is discouraged.
- When the parents of the church do not come requesting that their child be allowed to participate in the Supper, then the elders may proceed as follows:
 - An elder (perhaps with a pastor) may take initiative to call on the family to welcome the child to the Lord's Supper
 - If there is interest expressed, then the steps outlined above may be followed
- When a baptized child in the church whose parents do not attend the church requests participation in the Lord's Supper, then the elders may proceed as follows:
 - An elder (perhaps with a pastor or another elder) may call on the family to determine if there is interest and permission for the child's participating in the Supper.
 - If permission is given (if there is interest), then the elders may assign a person within the church membership to serve as a "sponsor" to the child.

- Then, with the sponsor, the elder may follow the steps outlined above.
- For resources to help in the implementation of the above, boards of elders are encouraged to contact:
The Office for Education of Faith and Development
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