

Children and the Lord's Supper

Third Church | 26 April 2015

Introduction: A Word about Unity in Diversity

Third stands in the Reformed Evangelical Tradition, but we have folks from many different denominational backgrounds among us. Therefore we are committed to make the main thing the main thing and not be overly occupied with “secondary” theological matters. There are certain things that are doctrinally “essential” and others that are “non-essential.” John Stott says it this way:

“Whenever equally biblical Christians, who are equally anxious to understand the teaching of Scripture and to submit to its authority, reach different conclusions, we should deduce that evidently Scripture is not crystal clear in this matter, and therefore can afford to give one another liberty.”

In that light, we are committed to keep primary things primary and secondary things secondary. The theology of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, and how children participate in them, are secondary matters not primary matters. So even though I will teach from a particular position today, there will be people who don't agree and that's ok. We can remain in unity even with different views on the subject.

There are a couple of theological principles that are key in order to understand the Reformed understanding of the sacraments and our children's participation in them.

Key theological principle #1: The Covenant Community

In Scripture we see that God is a *covenant-making God*: it his nature to make and keep covenants with his people. “I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants *for the generations to come*, to be your God *and the God of your descendants after you*” (Gen 17:7). God establishes his covenant not just with individuals but with whole communities and their progeny. This carries over into the New Testament as well. Peter at Pentecost preaches that “the gift of the Holy Spirit is for you *and for your children*” (Acts 2:39). In Jewish worldview of the early Christians, children were undeniably part of the spiritual community. Just as circumcision was a mark of the Old Testament family of God, baptism now became the sign of the new

covenant family of God. “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved – you and your whole household,” Peter tells Cornelius, and then he and his whole family were baptized (Acts 16:31-33). Later in the chapter Lydia and her entire household were baptized (Acts 16:14-15). Paul in 1 Cor 7:14 calls the children of believers “holy” by nature of their association with believing parents.

In that light, we believe that children are an integral part of this new covenant family. In the Presbyterian tradition we call them “Covenant children” to describe their unique standing. We believe that the children of believers are in covenant with God, and therefore that they are offered the same promises and blessings as their parents.

This is amazing good news because it gives us total confidence in God’s faithfulness to his covenant promises for our children. We believe that God keeps his promises to his covenant children. It also means that we are not an aggregation of individuals –our faith is a communal faith. Just as the faith of the friends “stood in” for their paralyzed friend when he was healed (Luke 5:17-39), so the faith of the parents and the community “stands in” for the baby in baptism. In the same way, the faith of the parents and community stands in for the child at the table even if she doesn’t understand completely.

In the Reformed tradition, we have a highly communal understanding of what happens in faith and worship. Because of that we strongly believe in the participation of children in the Supper. They are members of the covenant community every bit as much as the adults!

Key Theological Principle #2: Sacraments as Means of Grace

In the Reformed tradition, we believe that the sacraments (Baptism and the Lord’s Supper) are “means of grace.” Literally, they are “means” by which God conveys grace to those who participate in them.

Some traditions view the sacraments as just empty symbols that are more about the faith of the individual who is participating in them. In that view, baptism is about the person’s faith who is getting baptized, and communion is about the faith of the person who is receiving it. But in the Reformed tradition, we believe the sacraments *are primarily about God and what God is doing.*

We believe that the sacraments are not empty symbols, but that God is actually doing something, powerfully communicating and accomplishing something

through the sacraments. So the sacraments are less about our faith and more about God's grace.

Q: What are the sacraments?

A: The sacraments given by God and instituted by Christ, namely baptism and the Lord's Supper, are visible signs and seals that we are bound together as a community of faith by his death and resurrection. By our use of them *the Holy Spirit declares and seals the promises of the gospel to us.* (City Catechism)

So this explains why we believe in infant baptism. Infant baptism is obviously not about the faith of the child being baptized! It is about what God is doing; that through baptism God is working powerfully by his Holy Spirit to already begin the work of regeneration in the child. The same goes with the Lord's Supper- it is not first and foremost about our faith, but what God is doing to us and in us through the Supper. God is communicating his grace, mercy, forgiveness, and love.

So this is why traditionally in the Reformed faith, having a perfectly clear and reasoned explanation of the Christian faith and the Lord's Supper *isn't* a prerequisite in bringing a child to the Table. Some examples:

Now it is certain that Jesus Christ did not prescribe his sacraments for us in vain, since *he works in us all he represents by these holy signs*, although the manner in which he does it *goes beyond our understanding and is incomprehensible to us, just as the operation of God's Spirit is hidden and incomprehensible.* Belgic Confession (1561) Article 35.

“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 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 blessing. As such, the Supper must surely not be considered as the goal for baptized children. It is not a reward for making a 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 that they need it. On the contrary, the food and drink provided for them are among the means by which our children grow to

maturity.” *Commission on Theology Report to the 1988 Synod of the Reformed Church in America.*

So you can see, the emphasis in the Reformed Tradition is much more on God and what God is doing in and through the Lord’s Supper. Though the faith of the individual is important, we ultimately rely not on our individual faith but on God’s faithfulness to us, and God working his grace through the sacraments.

The Right Time?

So the question arises, when is the right time for a child to come to the table? There is disagreement about this, but I think there are at least two important factors to keep in mind:

Factor 1: The Child’s Desire

This first set of statements emphasizes the desire of the child as a sign of the Holy Spirit’s work in the child.

When a person is baptized as a child, the session shall equip and support the parent(s) or those exercising parental responsibility for their task of nurturing the child for receiving the Lord’s Supper. *When the child begins to express a desire to receive this Sacrament*, the session should take note of this and provide an occasion for recognition and welcome. (Presbyterian Directory of Worship, W-4.2002).

“What is the duty of the child?

It is the duty of the 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.*” (1889 General Synod of the Reformed Church in America).

When a child desires to come to the table and is drawn to it, it is a sign that the Holy Spirit is working in the child’s life and prompting her to come to the table. We respond to that desire in faith by instructing our children and bringing them to the Supper.

Factor 2: The Child’s Awareness

“The invitation to the Lord’s Supper is extended to all who have been baptized, remembering that access to the Table is not a right conferred upon the worthy, but a privilege given to the undeserving who come in faith, repentance, and love. In preparing to receive Christ in this Sacrament, the

believer is to confess sin and brokenness, to seek reconciliation with God and neighbor, and to trust in Jesus Christ for cleansing and renewal. Even one who doubts or whose trust is wavering may come to the Table in order to be assured of God's love and grace in Christ Jesus.

Baptized children *who are being nurtured and instructed* in the significance of the invitation to the Table and the meaning of their response are invited to receive the Lord's Supper, *recognizing that their understanding of participation will vary according to their maturity.* (Presbyterian Directory of Worship, W-4.2002)

So the emphasis here is on the child's understanding of the Lord's Supper, but note that understanding will vary. It's not vital that your child recount the nature of substitutionary atonement and justification! It can be simply enough that she understands that this is about Jesus dying for her because he loves her. Indeed, she will come to understand that truth more and more as she regularly comes to the table. So when should a child come? To sum up, I would say this:

A child is ready to come to the Table when he or she has been baptized and incorporated into the covenant community, and when that child desires to come to the Table and expresses an age-appropriate awareness of Jesus' love and mercy expressed there. In that case we joyfully welcome that child to come to the table through the care and direction of the parent(s) and the community.

A beautiful Scriptural image of this is Matthew 19:13-15. Children are brought to Jesus by parents and others who loved them and desired Jesus would bless them. Jesus was so excited about this, and he was upset at the disciples who tried to discourage the parents. "Let the children come to me," Jesus demanded, "and do not hinder them!" He then reached out his hands, and even held them in his arms. He even states very boldly that "the kingdom of heaven belongs to little children."

This is a beautiful image for us as parents bringing our children to the table as soon as possible. In this story, it is not the children who exercised faith; it was those bringing them to Jesus. So this is our greatest calling as parents: to bring our children to Jesus. Jesus states that the Kingdom belongs to them. We respond to him by saying Yes, Lord, I believe that promise and claim it for my child! Bringing our children to baptism and the Lord's Supper is a powerful, tangible way we bring our children to the real presence of Jesus in the sacraments. And what does Jesus do? He loves them. He touches them, embraces them, receives them. He blesses them with the blessings of God.

Explaining Communion to Children

When we celebrate communion, we are remembering the last meal that Jesus had with his friends.

Bread and wine were an important part of each meal in the days when Jesus lived. Jesus picked up the bread and broke it to show his friends that his body would be broken for them. He poured out the wine to show them that his blood would be shed for them. He was showing them that he was about to die for their sin so they could be forgiven and be a part of God's family.

After Jesus rose from the dead and went to be with God, his friends continued to eat this meal because they knew that Jesus through his Holy Spirit was still there with them, reminding them of his grace and forgiveness.

So today, our church family gathers for Communion. A little bit of bread and grape juice is served to the congregation. As we eat, we remember Jesus and feel that God is still with us in a special way and will continue to be with us tomorrow and the days and months and years after that.

What do you do when someone gives you a present? You receive it. So when you come to the Lord's Supper, you are receiving the present of God's love and forgiveness again and again. All you have to do is receive the bread and juice as good news that Jesus has died for you and that he is with you and loves you. Be thankful and happy.

And you know what else? Everyone in the church is like a big family. When we have Communion, we know that all over the world, wherever there are followers of Jesus, they, too, share Communion. When you see the table in front of the church set up with bread and grape juice, you'll know the time for Communion has come again...a time to remember and celebrate how Jesus loved us and gave his life for us.

Here is a catechism question that can help you out:

Q: What is the Lord's Supper?

A: Christ commanded all Christians to eat bread and to drink from the cup in thankful remembrance of him and his death. The Lord's Supper is a celebration of God in our midst, bringing us into communion with God and with one another; feeding and nourishing our souls. It also anticipates the day when we will eat and drink with Christ in his Father's Kingdom. (City Catechism)

PAST: *God is assuring us of our forgiveness through Jesus' death and resurrection*

- We remember that Jesus died for us and rose again
- Our sins have been paid for, Jesus died in our place
- God promises us that we are his loved and forgiven children

PRESENT: *God assures us that we are part of his family*

- Jesus chose a family meal to remind us of his love!
- We are part of his family as his sons and daughters
- Jesus continues to be with us today by his Holy Spirit.
- We are celebrating with thanksgiving that Jesus is here and we are part of his family!

FUTURE: *God promises that one day we will be with him forever.*

- There will come a day when God will make all the sad and bad things go away, and people will live at peace with one another. We will eat and drink with Jesus in God's Kingdom.
- We look forward to that day!

The Lord's Supper Song

The Lord's Supper is a remembrance
Of Christ's death for us on the cross.
The Lord's Supper, sweet remembrance
Of Christ's death for us on the cross.

In which, by faith we partake,
we partake of His benefits.
In which, by faith we partake of His benefits.

The Lord's Supper is a remembrance
Of Christ's death for us on the cross.
The Lord's Supper, sweet remembrance
Of Christ's death for us on the cross.

Songs for Saplings

<http://songsforsaplings.com/music/volume-5-prayer-and-sacraments/>

Resources for Parents and Children

How our Children Come to Faith, by Stephen Smallman (P&R Publishing)

What is the Lord's Supper?, by Richard Phillips (P&R Publishing)

"We Come to Your Table." A booklet for families on the Sacrament of Communion (Reformed Church in America).

<http://images.rca.org/docs/worship/WeComeToYourTable.pdf>

New City Catechism, www.newcitycatechism.com

Songs for Saplings (Scriptural and catechetical songs)

<http://songsforsaplings.com>