

# REFLECTIONS

REFLECTIONS ON CHILDREN AT THE LORD'S SUPPER

## Children at the Lord's Supper and Reformed Theology

**W**hen the CRC synod decided last summer to “allow for the admission of all baptized members to the Lord’s Supper,” many were surprised at how quickly the measure was passed. It should be remembered, however, that the CRC has been wrestling with this issue ever since 1984. Major studies of the question came before Synods 1986, 1988, and 1995—all with majority and minority reports, and all with extensive biblical and theological arguments on both sides. What Synod 2006 did was point the denomination in a new direction—but on a biblical-theological basis that has been under construction for twenty years. Since many in the CRC are probably not familiar with the theological grounds for this new practice, we shall briefly introduce some of them here.

The traditional Reformed position is summarized in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 81:

**Q. Who are to come to the Lord’s table?**

A. Those who are displeased with themselves because of their sins, but who nevertheless trust that their sins are pardoned and that their continuing weakness is covered by the suffering and death of Christ, and who also desire more and more to strengthen their faith and to lead a better life. Hypocrites and those who are unrepentant, however, eat and drink judgment to themselves.

The answer to Q&A 81 rests heavily on a common interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11:27-29. To be displeased with ourselves because of our sins, we must examine ourselves before we come to the Supper (v. 28). In this way, we will not participate in the Lord’s Supper in an unworthy manner (v. 27) and thus eat and drink judgment to ourselves (v. 29). Since very small children are not capable of such self-examination, the argument goes, they should be excluded from the table.

As Professor Weima points out elsewhere in this issue, however, there is another way of understanding 1 Corinthians 11 that does not necessarily require the exclusion of children from the Lord’s Supper and may even open the door to their inclusion. We will not repeat the details or merits of that interpretation here. The growing shift to this other interpretation, however, opens the way for an appeal also to some of the theological emphases in our tradition, especially the Reformed understanding of the covenant and the sacraments.


### **The Nature of the Covenant**

Synod 2006 decided to open the Lord’s table to all baptized members “on the basis of their full membership in the covenant community.” (See the *Acts of Synod 2006*, pp. 727-731, for the complete record of synod’s action on this matter.) We have

by *Lyle D. Bierma*  
Professor of  
Systematic Theology



always stressed that God’s special relationship with believers and their children, rooted in the covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17, is essentially the same in both the Old and New Testaments. There is one community of God throughout all redemptive history, and children are full members of that community. As we say in the form for the baptism of children, “God graciously includes our children in his covenant, and all his promises are for them as well as for us.”

On that basis we have long argued that since children of believing parents in the Old Testament received the sacrament of initiation into the covenant community (circumcision), covenant children today should receive the sacrament of initiation that has replaced circumcision (baptism). Why, then, would the same not apply to the sacrament of nurture? If in the Old Testament covenant children participated in the household and communal celebrations of the Passover (Exod. 12:3-4, 21-26) and other sacred meals of remembrance (Deut. 12:6-7), they should also be welcome at the New Testament counterpart to these feasts: the Lord’s Supper. Members of the Old Covenant community were “all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea,” and they “all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink” from Christ (1 Cor. 10:1-4). 

**Children at the Lord's Supper**

▶ That pattern did not suddenly change in the New Covenant.

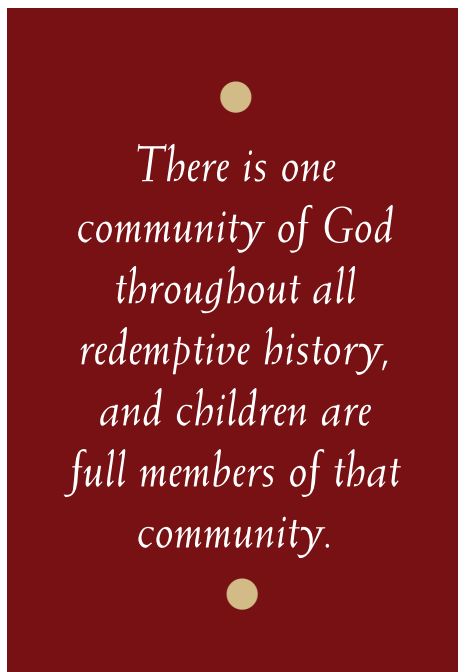
In other words, as critics of infant baptism have often pointed out, it seems as if we in the Reformed tradition are inconsistent when we appeal to the unity of the testaments to support infant baptism but not children at communion. Exclusion of children from the Lord's table suggests a discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments that seems to undermine the very continuity on which the case for infant baptism is built.

**The Nature of a Sacrament**

When it comes to the doctrine of the sacraments, Reformed theology has emphasized that a sacrament is first and foremost something God does, not something we do. Christ himself instituted baptism and the Lord's Supper, and in both sacraments it is God who acts and speaks. They are, as we say, means of grace—God's grace. There God reminds and assures the covenant community of his promises.

But this gracious character of the sacraments is compromised when we exclude covenant children from the Lord's table. In the baptism of an infant, the covenant community is given a graphic demonstration of the promise of salvation by grace alone as the water of promise is applied to a tiny child—helpless, uncomprehending, and wholly incapable of any merit-earning work. Why, then, must these same children “earn” their way to the table of promise? Why must they first pass a test of understanding and worthiness? That seems to run counter to the very message of grace that the sacraments proclaim. If the sacraments are for members of this community who are weak and in need of God's grace, everyone—whether near the end of their Christian life or in the earliest stages—should feed around the table.

Closely related to this is the fact that both of the Christian sacraments communicate the same message, the heart of the gospel itself. In both baptism and the Lord's Supper God reminds and assures us of the promise to forgive our sins and grant us new life on the basis of Christ's sacrifice on the cross (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 66, 69, 75). If this message is visibly proclaimed as the covenant community



gathers around its children at the baptismal font, it should be visibly proclaimed to that same community gathered with its children at the Lord's table. If there is no difference in the message, why differentiate among those who may hear it?

Where, then, does faith come in? After all, sacraments may be God's visible word to us, but God also calls us to respond to that word. Those who participate in the Lord's Supper are supposed to “remember,” “proclaim,” “examine,” and “discern.” A tiny child is simply not capable of this, at least not at the level of faith that these verbs seem to presuppose.

Once again the parallel with baptism may be helpful. An infant at the baptismal font is not capable of such faith either. But we in the Reformed community have always stressed the importance of *communal*, not *individual*, faith when we baptize our children. At the font God addresses the entire covenant community with his promises, and the faith of the parents and of the rest of the community “stands in” for the child by way of response. Why not also at the communion table? The individual faith of the child can then develop in the midst of the experience of full fellowship with the believing community.

**The Reformed Confessions**

This has been a very brief introduction to the theological case for the position adopted by Synod 2006. Two of the chal-

lenges for the CRC in the years ahead will be to educate its members about this theological basis and to deal with the theological objections that are sure to arise.

But an even bigger challenge, perhaps, will be to come to terms with our confessions on this issue. As a confessional denomination we look upon our statements of faith as reliable summaries of biblical teaching and the framework for our theological thinking. As we have already seen, the Heidelberg Catechism grants entry to the Lord's Supper only to those who are displeased with their sins. And the Belgic Confession states that Christ instituted the sacrament of the Supper “to nourish and sustain those who are already born again and ingrafted into his family: his church.” Moreover, “no one should come to this table without examining himself carefully, lest ‘by eating this bread and drinking this cup he eat and drink to his own judgment’” (art. 35). Both of these confessions define admission to the table on the basis of the common Reformed interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11.

It appears, therefore, that the CRC's decision to welcome all baptized members to the table is at odds with its own confessional position. What then should we do? Change the confessions in some way or add a footnote? Or could we argue that the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism establish the standards only for *adult* participation in the Supper? Since they do not explicitly address the question of *children* at communion, they cannot be said to forbid the practice. Of course, that is probably not how the authors were thinking when they wrote the confessions, but how much are we bound to an author's intent on matters like this?

These are the kinds of questions we will need to address to maintain our integrity as a confessional denomination. Since many in the CRC are not even aware of synod's decision last summer—let alone the biblical, confessional, and practical difficulties that surround it—it is important that we proceed carefully and charitably as we begin to implement it. This move toward enlarging the circle around the table of the Lord provides a historic opportunity to demonstrate the very unity of the body of Christ to which the sacrament of the Supper points.