

Baptized Children and the Lord's Table

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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, Question 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 an 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 a 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 confession 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 upon 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" (Matt. 19:14).

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