

A Precious Feast, a Tangled Web: A Case for Welcoming Children at the Table

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The older I get, the more hungry and thirsty I become for communion. The older I get, the more I receive that crust of bread and sip of wine as food desperately needed for the journey and an appetizer for the great wedding feast of the Lamb. The older I get, the more moving it becomes to look someone in the eye, hold out the loaf and say, "Nancy, this is the body of Christ broken for you." The older I get, the more frustrating I find my own denomination's practice of excluding children from the Lord's table. I resonate deeply with a woman who said to me recently, "My own joy in receiving the sacrament is always tempered by the disappointment of my [eleven- to sixteen-year-old] children who simply experience it as a longer than usual service that is not for them." The practice of excluding children from the precious feast is the end result of a tangled web of history, cultural contexts, and anxiety (that powerful triumvirate) trumping Scripture and Reformed theology. My denomination is not alone in this struggle; readers of *Reformed Worship* may see their own traditions in this tangled web as well.

It Wasn't Always This Way

For most of Christian history, all baptized members of the church were invited to the Lord's table every Sunday. (Still today in Orthodox churches newborn infants are brought forward in a parent's arms and the priest touches a crumb of bread and a spoon of wine to the child's lips.) Through a slow process that culminated in the twelfth century the Western (Roman) church developed the doctrine of transubstantiation. This doctrine instilled such anxiety throughout the church that eventually the hierarchy ordered members to participate at least once a year. Thankfully this did not last; the sacrament of confirmation was carried out at age 7 (considered the "age of reason"), allowing confirmands to come to the table. Just who participated and how frequently varied tremendously.

The Reformers worked through this tangled web and-not surprisingly-came to at least four different conclusions on these matters (in the traditions developed by Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and the Anabaptists).

Calvin's Reformed tradition continued the Catholic hermeneutic of anxiety but gave it a new theological justification by redirecting it through the communion passage in 1 Corinthians 11. Paul's declaration "Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord" (vv. 27ff.) became the focus of Reformed communion forms. Anxiety blinded believers to that most elementary hermeneutical guideline: to examine the context of a passage. The church in Corinth was plagued by elitist dissension-rich over poor, tongues-speakers over humble servers, followers of the gifted Apollos over followers of "weak" Paul-and this elitism completely shaped their communion practices. The key instruction comes in verse 29: "Anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing *the body of the Lord* eats and drinks judgment on himself." Here Paul is seeking not an individualistic self-examination-"What's the state of my personal, private walk with God?"-but rather "How are we as a community honouring the reality that the Spirit has made us into one body, the body of the Lord?" For this reason chapter 11 is followed by the stunningly beautiful descriptions of the various members of the one body in chapter 12, which in turn climaxes in the profoundly moving portrait of *agape* in chapter 13 (a chapter written not with weddings in mind, but the unity of believers).

Calvin's interpretation of the 1 Corinthians 11 warnings replaced the Corinthian elitisms with a new one: those with sufficient rational understanding of the Christian faith over those without sufficient understanding; only the former were qualified to come to the Lord's table (provided they had publicly professed their faith). This new anxiety-driven elitism made it difficult to obey Paul's command to recognize the body as a unity of generations. To Calvin's

credit, he desired to serve communion weekly and include ten-year-olds who had professed their faith, but others prevented him from following through on these desires.

The Trumping of Theology

Working with the ancient writings of Scripture (which often don't specifically address issues we are struggling with today) and developing theologies that honour these writings inevitably lead to tangled webs. Seeking to right wrongs almost always leads to new (but hopefully lesser) wrongs embedded within the "rightings." With due respect for my theological ancestors, I believe that a number of "Reformation rightings" led to these "wrongs" in the children and communion issue.

1. *The "works" of right understanding and personal commitment are requirements for receiving a communal means of grace.*

A foundational Reformation principle is *solī gratia*-by grace alone-and yet I must pass a test in order to receive a central means of grace. What test did Judas pass when Jesus served the elements to him?

2. *Covenant theology is undermined.*

The Reformed tradition wonderfully celebrates the centrality of God's covenantal dealings with *all* his children, yet church polity tells us that there are two tiers of church membership: baptized (partial) members and communicant (full) members. This inconsistency has tremendous pastoral implications: many Reformed children and teens are confused about their role in the church.

3. *The unity of the sacraments of baptism and communion is undermined.*

Scripture makes no clear pronouncements concerning either infant baptism or communion by children. The Reformed tradition has developed a strong theological framework to support its practices of infant baptism, but this framework is ignored when communion by children is discussed.

4. *The unity of the Old and New Testaments is undermined.*

Central to my love of the Reformed tradition is its ability to see the whole picture of God's way with the world, the one story fulfilled in Christ. Working from this wholeness, Reformed theology makes a strong case for the covenantal relation between circumcision and baptism. A similarly strong case can be made for the covenantal relation between the Passover and communion, which suggests that children's participation in the Passover celebrations has significant implications for communion.

Undoubtedly this article raises more questions than it provides clear answers. Here are some helpful resources:

- Tim Gallant's *Feed My Lambs* (Grande Prairie: Pactum Reformanda Publishing, 2002). Available at info@pactumbooks.com.
- David Rylaarsdam's essay "Reconnecting Baptism and the Lord's Supper."
- In 1995 the synod of the Christian Reformed Church laid out simple steps in providing a [new option](#) for younger members to participate at the table.
- [Synodical documents](#) from the Christian Reformed Church pertaining to this issue.

See also *RW 48*, a theme issue on the Lord's Supper that includes an article on children at the Lord's table (pp. 40-42).

5. *The partnership of Word and sacrament is undermined.*

Reformed worship has always stressed the profoundly complementary character of Word and sacrament, but in practice it has tended to be "WORD" and "sacrament," reversing the opposite imbalance in the Catholic tradition at the time of the Reformation. Why do we

operate with two different sets of assumptions concerning how our children are fed by the Word and by the sacraments?

6. The unity of the body is not recognized.

Scripture contains numerous stories, exhortations, and practices that point to the unity of the redeemed body, overcoming differences in ethnicity, gender, social/economic status, perceived "righteousness," and, yes, age. The multigenerational character of the body of Christ is one of the many jewels in its crown, one that needs to shine especially brightly in our generationally fragmented culture. Our communion practice reinforces these cultural tendencies.

7. The relationship between mystery, understanding, and human development is not properly honoured. The older I get, the more I am overwhelmed by the wondrous mystery of God's grace received through the sacrament. The various doctrines that seek to explain just how Christ is-or is not-present in the sacrament are like clanging gongs or sounding cymbals before the reality of communion. As a theologian, I value understanding highly-in its proper place, taught to believers in developmentally appropriate ways. But ultimately I cannot explain exactly how Christ is present; I come to the table with childlike awe and gratitude, on level ground with the five-year-old.

8. A faulty theology of discipleship is reinforced.

A discipleship program that sees church education as culminating in profession of faith which, in turn, qualifies one to receive communion, assumes that church education is mandatory for children and teens and optional for adults. Rather, receiving communion stirs up our longing to grow in grasping how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, to recommit to ongoing, lifelong discipleship.

What's Next?

Three trends in the North American church today give me hope.

- A great revival in recognizing the power and wonder of worship, a desire to understand biblical teachings about worship more fully, and a hunger to practice worship in the richest, most Spirit-honouring ways that we can. This revival has not yet encompassed the issue of children and communion in a significant way, but I am convinced that it will.
- A growing sense that worship must recover and give expression to the awe, mystery, and wonder that permeates our relationship with God. As this posture of adoration gains more sway in our worship, we also recognize how crucial the sacraments are in opening us up as a people of awe, and we long for our children to share this posture with us.
- As the generationalism of our culture becomes more and more pronounced, the church is recognizing how its own generational divides make it easy prey for this dark spirit of our age. The matter of children and communion is one of many ways in which the church is recognizing its vulnerabilities.

In light of these trends, I encourage worship planners and leaders to do the following:

1. Continue to do all that you can to build the strength of the three trends described above. As the beauty of our worship deepens and our congregations more intentionally practice their multigenerational character, the desire to include our children in communion will intensify.

2. Be aware of the best practices available for celebrating communion, and incorporate these in your congregation's worship in appropriate ways. For example, congregations that have traditionally passed the elements through the pews are recognizing that inviting worshipers to the front to receive enhances the worship. As children join their parents in coming forward and receive at the very least a blessing by name from the server, their participation in the sacrament becomes much more meaningful.

3. Be aware of options your denomination provides concerning children and communion and take steps to use them, providing the necessary education along the way to ease deep-seated and often unexamined anxieties.

4. If necessary-and if the time is right-challenge your denomination to re-examine its practices and their theological/biblical underpinnings.

Questions for Discussion

It is important for those who oversee worship to spend time reflecting on unspoken traditions or unofficial policies at work in worship itself. To help your worship committee reflect on your church's practice of the Lord's Supper, consider adapting the following set of questions for your situation.

- What is your church's official policy regarding who can participate in the Lord's Supper? What is your current practice? Are the two in agreement?
- How are we to understand 1 Corinthians 11:27?
- What do the church's confessions teach us (for example, Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 81)?
- What is the relationship between faith and knowledge?
- How are children/teens included in (or excluded from) participating in communion in your church? How does that practice impact their understanding of the Lord's Supper and their own relationship with God?
- Besides partaking of the elements, what are some ways to include children in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper?