



Children & the Lord's Supper

Decisions made at the 2019 General Assembly of Australia of the Presbyterian Church¹ have meant that session has recently spent time thinking about whether it is appropriate for children of Christian parents to receive the Lord's Supper (this idea is sometimes called *paedocommunion*).

Session believes that The Lord's Supper, the new covenant meal instituted by Jesus, is **available to all God's covenant family, including children**. (Unless, on the basis of unbelief or unconfessed sin, they have separated themselves from the covenant family, or are under discipline). Baptism of infants is an expression of the covenant God makes with families, on which this understanding of the Lord's Supper is based. Very young children, (and developmentally challenged adults) are able to trust Jesus, and make a credible profession of faith. The degree to which they understand and explain their faith changes with maturity and age, and is not necessarily connected to the amount of faith, their mental development or maturity.

¹ 2019 GAA resolved (Min. 73) to:

- (3) Affirm the teaching of the Westminster Confession of Faith that in the Lord's Supper "worthy receivers ... inwardly by faith, really and indeed, yet not carnally and corporally but spiritually, receive and feed upon, Christ crucified, and all benefits of His death", which implies that a person must exercise faith in order to receive the Supper in a worthy manner.
- (4) Determine that, because of necessity of faith, and in accord with the mainstream of the Reformed tradition, as expressed in the Larger Catechism, the Supper should only be offered to those who "are of years and ability to examine themselves" and who have made a profession of faith and who are baptised.
- (5) Affirm that there is no set age at which a person is able to examine themselves and make a profession of faith.
- (6) Remind sessions that they have a responsibility for the admission to the Lord's Table, as well as suspension from it, and that admission to the Table should not be left entirely to the decision of individuals or families.
- (7) Affirm that the responsibility of a Session with regard to admission to the Lord's Table is discharged by the preaching of the word and may also be by means of admonition, course of instruction and other mechanisms.
- (8) Instruct sessions which wish to provide for children to receive the Lord's Supper to ensure that children are instructed in the faith and about the nature of the sacrament and that children have either made a public profession of faith, or that the Session has confirmed in consultation with their believing parent/s or guardians that they have made a credible profession of faith.
- (9) Encourage sessions to clarify their understanding of the theology and practice of the Lord's Supper, including admission to the Supper; and communicate this clearly to the congregation.
- (10) Encourage sessions to deal carefully and charitably with members who transfer to their congregation and have been used to a different pattern of admission to the Lord's Supper.

Helping little disciples to follow Jesus

We believe that the children of Christians should be encouraged to share the Lord's Supper. This is because the children of Christians, as members of God's covenant family, should also be regarded as Christians. They are little disciples who need to be taught about what the Lord Jesus has done for them, and how to follow him. One way we can help our kids to follow Jesus—as individual families and as a church family as a whole—is to invite them to share the Lord's Supper with us.

The origins of the Supper: the Passover Meal

The Lord's Supper derives from the Old Testament Passover meal. God instituted the Passover meal on the eve of rescuing his people from Egypt (Exod. 12) as an ongoing memorial. He made it clear that the feast was to be used to teach Israelite children about God's great rescue of his people (Exodus 12:25-27). While there is no explicit mention of the children sharing in the meal, it is clearly implied that they did.

A new beginning: the Lord's Supper

In Matthew 26 (and parallel passages) Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper when he transformed the Passover Feast. ("This cup is the new covenant in my blood" -1 Corinthians 11:25). He made two of the symbolic elements used in the feast—bread and wine—to refer to his body and blood, symbolising his coming death as the Passover Lamb (1 Corinthians 5:7). Like Passover, the Lord's Supper was instituted to be an ongoing memorial for God's people (1 Corinthians 11:24-26).

Just as the Passover was the covenant meal for Old Testament believers, we believe the Lord's Supper is the covenant meal for New Testament believers. God's covenant, in both Old and New Testaments is with believers and their families, and so we believe the Lord's Supper is for covenant families.

What next?

The responsibility for teaching a Christian child about the Lord Jesus lies primarily with that child's Christian parent/s. However, it is the Session's responsibility to admit people to the Lord's Supper (formally, through people becoming communicant members). Accordingly,

1. Session will provide information for parents (this article)
2. Session will provide a short course (about 1 hr) for parents and children, for the purpose of children making profession of faith and being admitted to the Lord's Supper.
3. In consultation with parents, Session will admit to the Lord's Supper those children it observes have a credible confession of faith, appropriate for their age.
4. Session will encourage these children into communicant membership (although this isn't required).

Session is excited about this, and want to see all God's covenant people included in the covenant meal.

Lord's Supper Course Outline:

1. What is a Christian?
 - a. Jesus was God's Son, he came from heaven to earth, and taught people about God's kingdom, and that they needed to repent from their sin, and trust him.
 - b. He died instead of us, as punishment for our sin. God raised him from the dead, and he's now in heaven. One day he'll come back and take all those who love him to be with him forever.
 - c. A Christian is someone who repents of their sin, and who loves, trusts and follows Jesus. A Christian reads the Bible and does what it says, prays, and meets with other Christians.
2. What is the Lord's Supper?
 - a. Jesus celebrated the Passover Meal with his disciples on the night before he died (Matthew 26). He gave them the bread to eat, and said, "Take and eat it. This is my body." Then he gave them the wine to drink, and said, "Drink it. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. In the future, do this to remember me.
 - b. Churches celebrate the Lord's Supper regularly during church services. (We do it once every two months). We remember that Jesus died for us, we thank him for his death for us and that he lives with us always. We say sorry for our sins, and thank God for our forgiveness. Everyone at church is joined together as one family because we all eat the same bread, which is Jesus' body. Eating and drinking the Lord's Supper strengthens us to follow Jesus, because we remember what he's done and we trust him to be with and help us.
3. What do I do during the Lord's Supper?
 - a. Give thanks to God for the gift of Jesus, who died for you
 - b. Say sorry for the wrong things you've done
 - c. Give thanks that Jesus lives with you and will strengthen you to follow him, just like bread and juice strengthen your body.
 - d. Eat the bread and drink the juice

Does the Bible teach that children should be excluded from the Lord's Supper?

Traditionally, Presbyterian churches have restricted access to the Lord's Supper to those who "of years and ability to examine themselves". (Westminster Larger Catechism Q177). In practice, this usually means that teenage children go through a communicant membership course, become communicant members, and can receive the Lord's Supper. Younger children are not permitted to receive the Lord's Supper. This seems to be on the basis of 1 Corinthians 11:27-29

²⁷Therefore, 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. ²⁸A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. ²⁹For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself.

Sessions want to prevent anyone from eating and drinking in an unworthy manner (v27). Verse 29 says that this happens when someone eats and drinks "without recognizing the

body of the Lord.” This has often been understood to mean not understanding what Jesus has done, or what the Lord’s Supper is about. On this view, young children are not able to understand enough about the Christian faith until they get to a certain age, and so should be prevented from eating and drinking.

However, the context of the instructions about the Lord’s Supper is that Paul is criticizing the Corinthians because there are divisions among them (11:18). He gives the example, v20, of coming together for the Lord’s Supper. Some people are selfishly eating before others arrive, some are even getting drunk (11:21). The rich are humiliating those who have nothing (11:22). Paul has no praise for them. Instead, he gives instructions for how the Lord’s Supper *should* happen (v23). V27 then, most naturally, refers back to the criticism of the unworthy eating and drinking in v20-22. Not recognizing the body of the Lord (v29), then, refers to not appreciating or valuing the church. (10:17 refers to the church as one body. 12:12 says that as the body has many parts, so it is with Christ. We were baptized into one body. 12:27 says that the church is the body of Christ). It has nothing to do with children not having a sufficient understanding of Christian things, and should not be used to exclude them from the Lord’s Supper. In fact, to do so is to do the very thing Paul criticizes the Corinthians of- being divided rather than united!

In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul draws parallels between Israel’s eating and drinking of spiritual food and drink in the wilderness (v4) with the Corinthians eating and drinking the spiritual food and drink of the Lord’s Supper. He makes the point that all of Israel were baptized into Moses and all ate and drank – even children. This does not mean all were saved – in fact, Paul’s point is that God was not pleased with most of them (10:5). However, all were entitled to the sacramental privilege, by virtue of their covenant membership. It was the disobedient, not the immature, with whom God was not pleased. The children, like many of the adults, may not have had complete understanding of the meaning of the manna (in fact eating was intended to teach them about God’s generosity - Deuteronomy 8:3), yet they all ate. Not all may have understood the meaning of the spiritual feeding, however, all spiritually ate and drank and all participated in Christ.

1 Corinthians 10:14-17 makes the point that eating from the one loaf symbolizes that we are one body. To exclude any of Christ’s body, including children, from the meal goes against this unity. The children of one believing parent are holy (1 Corinthians 7:14). They have been baptized into Christ’s body (1 Corinthians 12:13), the covenant family, and therefore should not be excluded from the covenant meal.

“Their baptism symbolises their entrance into Christ and the Lord’s Supper symbolises their feeding on Christ... Participation in Christ through the manna and the water was not dependent upon an adult understanding of the sacrament. Similarly, participation in the Lord’s Supper is not dependent upon an adult understanding of the meal. Rather, participation in the sacrament is a means of teaching that very understanding of what it means to be a part of Christ’s body through his death and resurrection. It bespeaks inclusion rather than exclusion, for it is a communion of Christ with his people.” (Glenn N. Davies, “The Lord’s Supper for the Lord’s Children”. *Reformed Theological Review*, 50.1, p16)