



When Should Our Children Come to the Table



Alfred J. Poirier

**WHEN SHOULD OUR CHILDREN
COME TO THE TABLE**

Alfred J. Poirier

A Ministry of
Rocky Mountain Community Church
2832 Broadwater Avenue
Billings, Montana 59102
(406) 259-7811

© 1995, 2000 by Alfred J. Poirier

When a child is baptized into God's covenant, one more place is set at the table of the Lord. We are always to teach our little ones that they have been set apart by baptism as God's own children and that he calls them to grow in their faith. From earliest age we teach our children to pray: "Our Father which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name...." We encourage them to sing "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so...." We also call them to confess their sins, ask forgiveness, and to trust God in his promises in order to grow in likeness to Christ. In all of this, as a church we have an obligation to prepare our children by God's grace to respond to Christ's invitation to come to his table.

It is in seeing the need to help our children come to the Lord's Supper, that we must inquire of God as to who are the proper participants to his table. Now our Lord Jesus Christ has given to his church two sacraments: Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Both are signs and seals that he has attached to his covenant of grace. However, while both are alike in portraying the blessings of salvation that are found in Christ, they are not identical. These differences give us warrant for distinguishing between communicant and non-communicant members.

Our *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Question 177, sets down for us some of these differences between baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Q.177 *Wherein do the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper differ?*

Ans. The sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper differ, in that Baptism is to be administered but once, with water, to be a sign and seal of our regeneration and ingrafting into Christ, and that even to infants; whereas the Lord's Supper is to be administered often, in the elements of bread and wine, to represent and exhibit Christ as spiritual nourishment to the soul, and to confirm our continuance and growth in him, and that only to such as are of years and ability to examine themselves.

These differences are the most obvious. But we notice in the answer given by the Catechism that they differ as to the persons who are able to receive the sacraments. Baptism is to be applied to all adults professing faith in Christ along with their children. The Lord's Supper, however, is to be given *"only to such as are of years and ability to examine themselves."*

Why is that? And what does this mean for our children? Are they half-members in the church? Doesn't their baptism give them privilege to all the blessings of Christ? To answer that let us look again more closely at the differences between these sacraments.

As we said, while both sacraments sign and seal God's promise of salvation, they are not identical in their use in Christ's church.

- 1] Baptism is external in application and given to one who is passive in reception. Baptism is passive ["Repent and be baptized."]; while the Lord's Supper is active ["Take and eat...do this in remembrance of me...proclaim the Lord's death...let him examine himself...recognize the body of the Lord...judge himself"]. While baptism is rightly administered to our infants, the Lord's Supper is given to one who eats, remembers, proclaims, and gives thanks. It requires a deliberate and reasonable activity of the member.
- 2] Baptism is a mark of initiation into the covenant community once-for-all. It is not a repeated reality, thus it is signified by a once-for-all sign. The Lord's Supper, on the other hand, is a nourishing event, intended by our Lord to be a repeated source of sustenance in covenant life and for covenant living.
- 3] Another important distinction to be made is that baptism is not given in the contexts of judgments for misuse while the Lord's Supper is. The Catechism speaks of one having the ability to examine himself. The necessity of that self-examination carries with it a threat of divine discipline. So the apostle commands all who partake of the Lord's Supper:

1 CO 11:27-31

^{v.27} Therefore, 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. ^{v.28} A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. ^{v.29} For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. ^{v.30} That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. ^{v.31} But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment.

- 4] Baptism is a sign of union (Romans 6) while the Lord's Supper is a sign of communion (1 Cor. 10,11). Communion speaks of a conscious hearing of God's word and willingness to obey. Our Lord in the great commission of Matthew 28.18-20, explicitly gives baptism as the sign of initiation into the covenant, marking one as a member of his church. Having taken the sign of baptism, he then is to be taught to obey all that Christ has commanded us -- and that includes teaching about the Lord's Supper.

The above should caution us from hastily claiming identity between these two sacraments. As our catechism states, eligibility for partaking of the Lord's Supper is dependent upon one's age and ability to examine themselves. Many focus undue attention upon what the appropriate age must be in order to become a communicant. But the Scriptural criteria is largely that of intelligent, spiritual discernment. It is this ability of spiritual judgment that should be for us the primary determinant as to who may be eligible to partake of the Supper.

Personal Examination & Appropriation

The requirement for self-examination in v.27 finds its reason stated in v.26. We are to examine ourselves because of the nature of partaking of the Lord's Supper.

1 CO 11:26 For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

This verse explains why one who partakes in the Lord's Supper must examine himself. The reason is that the Lord's Supper is confessional. At the Lord's Supper we proclaim (katangelo = confess, proclaim, teach, preach) the Lord's death. Thus, communion is of a personal and confessional character and thus requires an active, personal and intelligent response. It is not simply a communal confession, as when everyone recites the Apostles' Creed. Rather, there is here a requirement upon the individual -- self-examination.

1. Examining (v.28), and judging (v.31) one's self.

v.28 A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup.

v.31 But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment.

What does this examination of the self entail? The word used in v.28 is to "test" (dokimazeto). It has the sense of testing or proving the authenticity of something. It also usually has the idea of approving. So Paul the Apostle uses this word in Romans 12.2 "Do not be conformed any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to *test and approve of* what God's will is -- his good, pleasing and perfect will." Consequently, we could say that Paul is calling for us to test and approve ourselves as worthy of taking of the Lord's Supper. By "worthily" is surely meant that we partake of the sacrament not by imitation, or through social conformity, but in full recognition and communion with Christ. And that means, we need to know the gospel for ourselves. Our catechism is excellent at giving wise advice on this matter. The Larger Catechism asks and answers:

Q.174 What is required of them that receive the sacrament of the Lord's Supper in the time of the administration of it?

Ans. It is required of them that receive the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, that, during the time of the administration of it, with all holy reverence and attention they wait upon God in that ordinance, diligently observe the sacramental elements and actions, heedfully discern the Lord's body, and affectionately meditate on his death and sufferings, and thereby stir up themselves to a vigorous exercise of their graces; *in judging themselves, and sorrowing for sin; in earnest hungering and thirsting after Christ, feeding on him by faith, receiving of his fullness, trusting in his merits, rejoicing in his love, giving thanks for his grace; in renewing of their covenant with God, and love to all the saints.*

Q.175 What is the duty of Christians, after they have received the sacrament of the Lord's Supper?

Ans. The duty of Christians, after they have received the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, is seriously to consider how they have behaved themselves therein, and with what success; if they find quickening and comfort, to bless God for it, beg the continuance of it, watch against relapses, fulfill their vows, and encourage themselves to a frequent attendance on that ordinance: but if they find no present benefit, more exactly to review their preparation to, and carriage at, the sacrament; in both which, if they can approve themselves to God and their own consciences, they are to wait for the fruit of it in due time: but, if they see they have failed in either, they are to be humbled, and to attend upon it afterwards with more care and diligence.

To test oneself to see if you are worthy is not to see if you are perfect. Rather, it is to know that you truly come in faith and repentance knowing full well your need of the benefits of Christ's death for you. Galatians 2.20 is a good example of a believer's self-knowledge:

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives within me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

Notice that in this Paul judges himself. What kind of man is he? He is a crucified man. A man co-crucified with Christ. As sin was condemned in Christ, so we know ourselves to be sinners deserving condemnation from God. We know we deserve only curse and not blessing from his hand. We know that the gift of righteousness is something we have not earned. But Paul also knows more. He personally appropriates the gospel to himself. He knows that the Son of God loves him. He can say with joy "the Son of God who loved *me* and gave himself up for *me*." This is true, biblical individualism. It is an active, conscious, and understanding faith that grasps Christ for oneself.¹

2. Recognizing the body of the Lord (v.29)

v.29 For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself.

What does it mean to recognize the Lord's body? The term in Greek means to judge. It is used in 1 Cor. 14.29 to describe the church's ability to judge the truthfulness of a prophet's message. It entails much of the same kind of activity required in self examination. So the word itself is not determinative for our understanding of this verse. Rather, it is the object of the action that gives this verse its import. As we saw from v.28 and 31, we are to be able and practice self-evaluation, seeing our need of and a true appropriation of the gospel of Christ on our part.

¹We are well aware that this requirement for self-examination is not always practiced even by adults. Yet, such failure on our part as parents should not prejudice the case for dismissing this requirement, or lessening of its demands. For with our children, we are looking first of all for their ability to make such self-evaluation. This is the common reason for waiting until they are of age. Usually that time is at the onset of puberty. But each child is different and it is best to look for other convincing signs. We will suggest latter in this paper several evidences for detecting one's spiritual maturity. One of these is when our children's thinking becomes their own. It is when our child moves from the stage of merely parroting the truths they are taught, to appropriating these truths for themselves and calling them their own.

Here we are called to recognize or judge, the body of the Lord. We need to discern the body of the Lord. The body of the Lord certainly and foremost refers to the Lord himself and only secondarily does it refer to the body of Christ as the church. This is seen in that v.29 is but the concluding clause of v.28. There in v.28 we are told that a man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. Then, v.29 concludes with an explanation. Consequently, recognizing the body of the Lord is recognizing the meaning of the bread and wine. The bread is Christ's body and the cup is Christ's blood. One can see that v.28-29 is a close parallel to that of v.27.

v.27 ...whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup *of the Lord*

v.27 ...will be guilty of sinning against the *body and blood of the Lord*

v.29 ...for anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing *the body of the Lord*

Thus, this verse gives the other side of the evaluation. It speaks of recognizing Christ and surely that recognition encompasses what Christ himself said: "Do this in *remembrance* of me." In the Lord's Supper we recognize Christ and remember him. We realize that this is no ordinary meal. It is not simply bread and wine. It is not simply performing a rite or act. It is discerning Christ as present for us in all the blessings which flow from his atoning death.

But, there is by implication also the need to recognize the body of Christ as his church and we members of one another. We see this in 1CO 10:16-17:

Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.

As you can see Paul understands our participation in the body and blood as being done in recognition of our membership one with another. Thus, the Lord's Supper is not a meal for a family, but members of the family of God, who in communion with their Lord, recognize the bond they have with the other members of the body. This entails knowing how we fit into the body, our responsibility to other members, and the mutual submission required by members.

3. The sanctions to the Lord's Supper

v.27 *whoever eats the bread and drinks the cup of the Lord in an **unworthy manner***

v.27b *will be **guilty of sinning against** the body and blood of the Lord.*

v.29 *For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and **drinks judgment on himself.***

v.30 *That is why many among you are **weak and sick**, and a number of you have **fallen asleep.***

v.31 *But if we judged ourselves, we would not **come under judgment.***

These explicit sanctions give evidence that the Lord's Supper is no mere memorial meal. As the sanctions themselves are disciplinary, and not necessarily expressive of God's eternal wrath, they assume stricter requirements of its reception as well as a more active engagement by the participant. One should note how such sanctions are not attached to baptism, which application as we have said is largely passive and which require for children only a parent's representation. It also calls our attention to the serious and solemn manner in which the sacrament is to be taken. The phrase "guilty of sinning against" in v. 27b is a legal term and places legal responsibilities upon the participant.

Such sanctions are one of the marks by which the Lord's Supper is shown to be distinct from and not identical to the Passover. This distinction presupposes some of the differences between the Old and New Covenant.

In the New Covenant age the sign is applied more broadly; there is an expansiveness to it. This is in keeping with what Paul says in Galatians: there is no longer any male or female, slave or freeman, Jew or Gentile in Christ, Gal. 3.26-29. Hence, Gentiles and women are included in baptism. Yet, while the new covenant is broader in its admission, it is also more stringent in its appropriation. There is a greater judgment for breaking covenant, Heb. 10.26-31; 2.1-4. This is because the New Covenant comes with greater glory (2 Cor. 3.7-18), and a grace of great affinity between God and man (Heb. 8.6-13; Jn. 14.21-23; 15.1-15).

Conclusion:

To preclude misunderstanding, let us be reminded of the fact that our children are already members. Being a non-communicant member does not mean being a half-member. Their move to communicant member status, upon evidence of their spiritual maturity, is an issue of sanctification. It is confirmation that they understand themselves not only in their union with Christ and his church, but in communion with Him and the members of Christ's body. With such maturity comes the privilege of taking the Lord's Supper.

That children, even infants, may be regenerated is not at issue. But regeneration is not sanctification. Ability to partake of the Lord's Supper requires a degree of sanctification and maturity. That maturity should evidence itself in an appropriated knowledge of Christ ("He is mine") and of his church: we are one body (you are my brother and I am yours). Other evidences of this would be a reading of the Bible independent of their parents; the same can be said with respect to prayer. Do you pray to God on your own, as well as with your family? Are you conscious of your sin? Are there evidences of such remorse?

Are you joyful over God's grace? Do you confess to others your love for Christ and his blessings towards you?

As you can see, these are but the signs expected of making a credible and intelligent profession of faith. Such profession is formally made by affirming on oath each of the six vows.

In light of the covenant's high demands, the necessity of saving faith for the participation in the real presence of Christ, the warnings and sanctions attached for unworthy eating and drinking the body of the Lord, along with the proper use of the keys of the kingdom by the elders, it is appropriate and necessary that the elders of Christ's church instruct parents and their covenant children as to an adequate preparation for participating in the Lord's Supper. It is incumbent upon us to guard the table as well as to call all to the table who:

- are able to make an intelligent and credible profession of faith in Jesus Christ;
- are able to discern the presence of our Lord in the sacramental rite;
- understand the spiritual unity we have with Christ and members of his body; and
- are of a spiritual maturity and sanctification to examine themselves.

Finally, since the Supper specifically is a proclaiming of Christ's death, and seeing that our Lord himself insists upon a public profession of His name before me as well as a bearing of one's cross (Matthew 10.32-33; Mark 8.34-38), it is entirely appropriate that our Session expect the children of the Church to profess his name before coming to His table.

Practical Helps:

Is my child ready for communicant membership? Let it be admitted from the outset that each of our children is different. And God's grace to them comes in a variety of ways and at different times.

What you as a parent should be doing is faithfully instructing your children as to their covenant membership with its blessings and responsibilities. Things that I have watched for in my own children are:

- an awareness of their sin and need of grace
- actions and words that reveal individual thought about the gospel. I listen closely to my children's prayers as well as seeing that they are praying independent of family worship.
- an ability to enter into the worship of the church. Are they ready to pray with the adults in a concert of prayer? If not, and they would rather run around and play with their friends, that is fine for now. It is a sign of their immaturity. But I let them know that Christ calls them to something higher.
- a desire to take of the Lord's Supper independently expressed to a parent or pastor or elder.
- an understanding of the vows required at a profession of faith
- an independent reading of and delighting in God's word.
- an interest in the preaching or teaching of God's word. They hear it as a message for them.

These are just some of the things that I look for in my own children. I expect that a church which seeks to incorporate their children into the life of the church (worship, prayer meetings, neighborhood canvassing) as well as promoting regular family worship, will see a greater number of its covenant children come to a desire and maturity of faith a bit earlier than those who don't practice such things. On the other hand, there are some of our children who seem to have little awareness of their sin and their need for Christ. While outwardly submissive, they lack evidence of true regeneration. Moreover, some

children mature late. They may be twelve or thirteen and still behave and think at a younger state. They may be slower in their development and seem unaware of spiritual matters. As you can see, there is no one, infallible way to determine these things. Rather, the evidence is made up of many things. A perceptive parent will see them. A prayerful parent will pray for them. A prudent parent will be faithful to teach the gospel truths and seize those wonderful moments when our children seem eager to speak on such things.

Talk with your Pastors

If there are questions about any of the above, speak with the youth director or any of the elders. We are here to see all of the church's covenant children come to saving faith and spiritual maturity in Christ.

Excursus: The Passover and the Lord's Supper

You may wonder where the call for self-examination before partaking in a sacrament comes from. This is an important question as many identify the Passover with the Lord's Supper and argue that if the children and infants could partake of the Passover, certainly they should be able to partake of the Lord's Supper. This is a charge brought against the paedobaptists by many Baptists. By it they claim that we who are paedobaptists are inconsistent.

But there is no inconsistency here. For our reasons for withholding the Lord's Supper until a child is able to give a credible profession of faith is derived from explicit apostolic command. And such commands have an Old Testament precedent.

Several elements of the Lord's Supper show themselves to not have applied to the Old Testament Passover.

- it should be "eaten and drunk" worthily
- every participant who partakes unworthily is said to be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of Christ and bring judgment upon himself
- every participant is called to self-examination and self-judgment
- every participant is said to proclaim the Lord's death

None of these elements are found in the Passover. In the Passover there is no explicit command that those who eat of it examine themselves. The only explicit command like this that is found in the Old Testament is associated with approaching the presence of the Lord, Lev. 21.1--22.16. It is interesting to note that the sanction of sickness and death applied alone to those who approached the presence of God, Num. 17.12--18.7; Ex. 19.21-23; 20.19.

But didn't the Lord establish His Supper at the occasion of the Passover? And shouldn't this prove the identification of the one with the other?

While our Lord instituted His Supper on the occasion of the Passover, there is no inseparable connection between the two. For example, Jesus did not eat this meal with his family, but his disciples. The meal added wine, which was not a part of the initial Passover. Moreover, Jesus appealed to the other Old Testament feasts besides the Passover. For example, his words of institution "this is the new covenant in my blood" harks back to the covenantal meal made with Israel in Exodus 24.8. There, if we may remember, only the elders, that is, the federal heads of the covenant, partook of the covenantal meal.

Such differences imply that the Passover was not the only covenantal feast contained in and consummated by the Lord's Supper. Rather, the pervasive testimony of the New Testament shows the Lord's Supper as the consummate meal for *all* the sacrificial offerings and feasts in the Old Testament. No single OT meal embraces all that it means to eat and commune with God in Christ. Yet, there are two sacrifices that are more closely associated with Christ's atonement than the others: the Great Atonement and the guilty offering.

In Hebrews 8-10 we find the Great Atonement as the epitome of the nature of the Lord's Supper; and likewise, the guilt offering (Lev. 5) which involved eating a meal (Lev. 7.6) in God's presence in a holy place. It is interesting to note in the case of the latter that sanctions of sickness and death were attached to it (cf. Num. 16-18). Moreover, it is the guilt offering that seems especially to prefigure Christ, Isa. 53.10 with Jn. 1.29.

Our aim has been to simply show that one cannot identify the Lord's Supper with the Passover. While there is surely a connection, it is a connection that all of the Old Testament sacrifices and sacrificial meals have with the Great Supper -- the Lord's Supper. Since an identification is not absolute, and since we find other meals in the Old Testament which required examination and had attending sanctions for those who approached the Lord, we cannot use the Passover as a guide for us to discern who and who should not partake of the Lord's Supper.

