

“LET THE CHILDREN COME: CHILDREN AND COMMUNION.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Texts: Mark 10:13-16; I Corinthians 11:27-30

Introduction.

“Let the little children come to me, do not hinder them.” As I said last week it’s a beautiful picture, an idyllic scene really. What could be more endearing to the hearts of parents than to see Jesus taking their sons and daughters into His arms and blessing them?

This beautiful picture has led some Christians to raise the question about bringing children to the Lord’s Table. If they are baptized and included in the visible covenant family of Christ then why should they be excluded from the family table and family meal?

This discussion and debate has really picked up speed in the past couple of decades and it came into our denomination in the form of an overture to Synod in 2006. After several years of discussion and study, the CRC at the 2011 Synod opened the table to baptized children without making a profession of faith. Last November our elders sent out a letter to this congregation saying in part the following:

“The Elders of First CRC have discussed, studied, reviewed and prayed about this decision and have come with a policy approved unanimously at the October 2, 2012 elders meeting.

“It is our recommendation that with the children at the Lord’s Table issue, we maintain the historical perspective of the Christian Reformed Church (especially in light of the warnings found in 1 Corinthians 11: 23-32). Children and young people are encouraged to know their Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ, and make a formal public profession of faith, as we currently do, before partaking of the Lord’s Supper thereby being held accountable to our Lord and to the Elders as communicant members to enjoy the blessings of such membership and to bear its obligations and responsibilities.”

Since we are in this text in Mark 10 about children and since today is a Sunday we observe the Lord’s Table, I have decided to explain the elder’s position from Scripture.

If we are to come into the Kingdom of God as little children, should we come to the table of our Lord not just as children but even while we still actually are children?

The Issue.

Historically Reformed denominations and churches have required a profession of faith for admission to the Lord’s Table. But over the past couple of decades this practice called paedocommunion (infant or child communion) has been increasing in some Presbyterian and Reformed denominations and churches.

Some of the reasons or arguments used to open the Lord’s Table to children are church history, the meaning of church membership, the nature of the covenant, the Passover and certain

interpretations of I Corinthians 11:17-34. By far the most important argument is the one based on Scripture and especially I Corinthians, so that's what we will focus on this morning.

What is I Corinthians 11:17-34 about?

Paul starts out addressing a specific abuse of the Lord's Supper, people were not waiting for others, but rushing ahead, and some were going without. The meal that was supposed to be a picture of our unity in Christ was being abused and becoming a cause for divisions and factions.

Those who try to find support for child communion in this text keep the focus on the hospitality issues. But the central part of the text can't be dismissed lightly as just an issue of proper table manners. The language of Paul moves from the specific situation in Corinth to a general instruction about all who come to the table.

The sin in I Corinthians was profaning holy things and partaking of them lightly or thoughtlessly or carelessly.

In the OT there are examples and reminders of the dangers of misusing or abusing holy things. Remember the sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, in Leviticus 10 when they "offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, which he had not commanded them" (Lev. 10:1) and God destroyed them. Or remember when Uzzah reached out to steady the Ark of the Covenant which was holy and not to be touched and God struck him down (II Samuel 6:6-7).

This is not a closed universe we live in, there is a true God and there are connections between the spiritual and the physical realm. Otherwise, what would ever be the point of offering a prayer to God? But we believe there is a connection with regard to prayer. And so it follows that there is a connection with regard to sin and guilt and disobedience.

If you take something that's of infinite worth and treat it as worthless or meaningless there will be a price and penalty to pay. The wrath of God is a thing most to be feared.

Paul is talking about holy things and warning that the unprepared or the ignorant or the ungodly ought not to partake for fear of God's judgment.

I Corinthians 11:27-32 Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an *unworthy manner* will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. 28 Let a person *examine himself*, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. 29 For anyone who eats and drinks *without discerning the body* eats and drinks judgment on himself. 30 That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.

What we receive at the Supper is real spiritual food and it's holy. These are the things of God for the people of God. Those who receive them in an unworthy manner are dishonoring and insulting Christ Himself. It's a sacrilege, as if we were trampling them underfoot.

So this warning must be taken to heart. Don't come to the table in an unworthy manner. Come to this table prepared, never out of neglect or indifference. ***And what is that preparation?*** Self-examination and discernment (knowledge of, understanding of) of the body of Christ. In other words, faith and repentance. Not perfect faith and repentance, not complete faith and repentance, but humble faith and repentance.

When we receive this mystery, Christ wants us to receive it with understanding, able to acknowledge His grace. We must be among those who:

Romans 10:9-10 ... confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.

And not just a once in a lifetime profession of faith, but on going confession, repentance, forgiveness and growing maturing in faith.

Some people go too far in this and exclude themselves from ever partaking of the Lord's Supper. But their problem is that they are only looking into themselves and looking for some worthiness in themselves. There is none. If by worth Paul means those who are pure and without sin, then no one could ever come to the table.

Our worthiness is found only in humble reliance on Christ's worthiness. When we acknowledge our unworthiness and confess it to Christ, His blood atones for our sin.

Come with humble repentance acknowledging your sinfulness and hopelessness apart from the forgiveness of Christ. Come with sincere faith in Jesus Christ that He really is who He says He is and He really did all that Scripture says He did.

By faith and repentance those who are unworthy become worthy, not by our works but by Christ's work. If you fall at the foot of the cross and rest only and completely in the perfect sacrifice of Jesus, be assured you welcome as Christ's guest.

As Calvin says, this table "is medicine for the sick, solace for sinners, alms to the poor" (Institutes, XVII.42).

The biggest issue in I Corinthians 11 is our ability to understand and examine our hearts. To be received worthily the elements must be received in true faith and sincere repentance.

Those who come to the table must be old enough and understanding enough to be able to obey the commands given by Paul in this Scripture.

This is why our elders say there is a difference between bringing our children to be baptized and bringing them to the table.

As citizens of the US not everyone participates in all the privileges of citizenship. There are age requirements and restrictions for driving, voting, serving in the military and holding certain public offices.

The supper is not for all baptized members. It isn't even for all professing church members. A person could be under the discipline of the elders and suspended from the sacrament for a season or until repentance, but they would still be a member. And certainly it isn't for hypocrites and the unrepentant.

The elders believe the new policy and practice of the CRC, while good intentioned, admits unqualified young children to the table. This fails to take seriously the very somber warnings of

Scripture that “anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.”

Who may participate?

It’s for those who meet the spiritual and intellectual qualifications set forth in Scripture.

First, those who have been baptized. Baptism marks the beginning, the initiation into the new covenant in Christ’s blood. It’s the mark of being included in the visible, covenant community with its blessings and privileges. Baptism acknowledges our children are in the covenant and share all the benefits of it. Nothing is lost to them by not taking the meal. No grace is withheld that’s not signed and sealed at baptism.

Second, those who believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord and have made a public declaration of faith, having met with the elders and given satisfactory evidence of their faith and desire to live in obedience to God’s Word. They affirm the faith of their parents and declare it to be their own.

There is no fixed age set on these things but what seems best to parents and the elders.

Third, those who are able to examine their heart and soul and life and who understand the sacrament and what Jesus has done and why. They are able to remember with understanding and be strengthened in their faith by their recalling the sacrifice of Christ.

Heidelberg Catechism:

Q. 81. 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 on themselves.

Q. 82. ARE THOSE TO BE ADMITTED TO THE LORD'S SUPPER WHO SHOW BY WHAT THEY SAY AND DO THAT THEY ARE UNBELIEVING AND UNGODLY?

A. No, that would dishonor God's covenant and bring down God's anger upon the entire congregation. Therefore, according to the instruction of Christ and his apostles, the Christian church is duty-bound to exclude such people, by the official use of the keys of the kingdom, until they reform their lives.

Is our life reflecting the character of our Lord with whom we are meeting at the table and whom we represent in the world?

For those whose life and outward behavior are clearly out of character with Christ’s, who are sinful and unrepentant in their conduct, the elders have the duty to warn that erring brother not to eat and drink judgment on himself.

Application and conclusion.

There are three lessons or applications we can make from our study this morning.

First, we must learn to test all things by Scripture. Our elders did that with the study paper from Synod. They tested it against I Corinthians and found it wanting. The people in Berea in Acts 17 tested the things Paul was preaching by checking the OT. I John 4:1 tells us to “test the spirits to see if they are from God.” We must learn to test everything by Scripture, what Synod says, what the pastor says, what the elders say, what teachers say. Learn the test of Scripture.

Second, we must learn to test ourselves by Scripture. When you come to this table come as little children, but not as children in understanding, not in ignorance.

Come as children in humility of heart, submission of spirit, dependence on Christ and His sacrifice. Come as children in love for the Father, in joy for the gift of faith in Jesus, free in the power of the Spirit. Come, having tested your heart and conscience, come having examined yourself.

Third, teach your children in these things of God, teaching them what they mean and the benefit of them and prepare their hearts and minds to profess their faith in Jesus and their love for the things of God and their on commitment to be covenant keepers.

Each time we observe the Lord’s Table together it’s another opportunity for parents to set before their children the responsibility they have to take their spiritual life seriously and to make a real and sincere profession of their faith.

Teach them the importance of remembering what we believe, of what the Gospel is and how we proclaim the Lord’s death and the benefits of His death until He comes again. Teach them the importance of having enough consciousness of their sin to appreciate the sufficiency of God’s forgiving grace in Christ. Teach them that to love Jesus is to hate sin.

Teach them when the bread is broken, it symbolizes the breaking of Christ’s body and when the cup is poured out it symbolizes the pouring out of Christ’s blood for us. When we partake we are participating in all the benefits of Christ’s death, and all that His death earned and gained for us. All the blessings of salvation and eternal life are ours.

Teach them this is a sacred gift of incomparable worth. For what we receive is given to us directly from Christ Himself. To receive it in an unworthy manner is to dishonor Christ Himself, to insult His sacrifice, to blasphemy His perfect obedience and righteousness. Each time we receive these gifts of God we are renewing the covenant of God in Christ’s blood. We are renewing our vows and our commitment and our devotion.

Most of all teach them and remind yourself to think not only of yourselves as we come, but to think about Jesus and what He said at this table and what He did to make this communion with Him possible. Think on Him. Take, eat, drink, remember and believe.