



Children at the Lord's Supper

For some years already this question has been under discussion in our circles. If my analysis of the situation is correct, then there was more agitation for admitting children to the Lord's Supper in the late 60's and early 70's than there is at present. Nevertheless, the issue continues to surface in our circles, and I doubt not that sooner or later it will come to the floor of synod, the more so since the synod of the Geref. Kerken has been dealing with it in recent years. In its latest decision that synod decided to allow children at the Lord's Supper, since God's Word neither commands nor forbids it. Certain conditions were attached to this decision, and it will be up to each local consistory to implement (or not implement) it as it sees fit.

We will come back to this decision of the Geref. Kerken later. But first a few things ought to be made clear. It will not do (as has been done) to argue for the legitimacy of "*kinder-communie*" ("children's communion") on the basis of "*children's baptism*." One has to keep clearly in mind the difference between the two sacraments. Baptism symbolizes our new birth in Jesus Christ, our initiation or incorporation into the church of our Lord Jesus Christ. Baptism into Christ is our Red Sea (through which we pass only once) whereby our children are "*ingrafted into the Christian Church, and distinguished from the children of unbelievers*" (Belgic Conf. Art 34; Q. & A. 74 of H.C.). In baptism the recipient is passive; he is no more active than he was in his physical birth.

The Lord's Supper, however, is a two-way street, so to speak, in which the new life gets its nourishment (Manna). Here the recipient is not passive, but active: God speaks and he responds. This demands an active response of faith and obedience on the part of the recipient. He is admonished to "*take, eat, remember and believe*." Every time he goes to the Lord's Supper he "*proclaims the Lord's death*." That is something which involves a conscious, believing response on the part of the participant. You might say it involves a confession of faith. And such a confession includes a "*sure knowledge*" of God's promises, and a "*heartly confidence*" that sins are forgiven, cf. Q. & A. 21 of H.C. In that sense partaking of the Lord's Supper is a believing response to one's baptism. Seen in this light, I agree with Van Andel when he says that "*our profession of faith is very closely linked up with the celebration of the Lord's Supper. They belong together. They are related to each other as a means to an end. To participate in the Lord's Supper is the goal; making profession of faith is only the way to reach this goal*" (*Thy Way is My Way*, p. 10). "*Without their knowledge*" our children share in Adam's condemnation, and so again "*without their knowledge*" they are received unto grace in Christ through baptism. But it is not "*without their knowledge*" that they participate in the Lord's Supper and proclaim the Lord's death till He comes. That takes a knowledgeable confidence and a confident knowledge.

Let me summarize this part by quoting a bit from Calvin's *Institutes*, Bk. IV, Chap. 16, section 30:

For if we consider the peculiar character of baptism, surely it is an entrance and a sort of initiation into the church, through which we are numbered among God's people: a sign of our spiritual regeneration, through which we are reborn as children of God. On the other hand, the Supper is given to older persons who, having passed tender infancy, can now take solid food.

This distinction is very clearly shown in Scripture. For with respect to baptism, the Lord there sets no definite age. But he does not similarly hold forth the Supper for all to partake of, but only for those who are capable of discerning the body and blood of the Lord, of examining their own conscience, of proclaiming the Lord's death, and of considering its power ... What is the command of the Lord: "Do this in remembrance of me"? What is that other command

which the apostle derives from it: "As often as you eat this bread, you will proclaim the Lords death until he comes"? ... None of these things is prescribed in baptism. Accordingly, there is a very great difference between these two signs...

It would appear to me, on the basis of the foregoing, that the *basic* problem of "children's communion" is thus resolved. Only children who have come to a measure of maturity and understanding could be considered eligible candidates for the Lord's Supper as I see it. And some form of "confession" would then have to precede such participation. Once that basic issue is solved, we can then discuss whether or not our present practice is satisfactory, at what approximate age our children or young people ought to be able to make such a confession, and other related matters. But these questions would be of secondary importance.

One cannot, of course, ever prescribe a set age at which our young people should make profession of their faith. That depends a great deal on a number of factors: the spiritual and all-around maturity of the person involved; his or her upbringing, in the home particularly; and various other factors that may present themselves. Personally, I have often felt that in general our young people wait too long to make profession of their faith. Young people who clearly love the Lord at age 15 or 16 should be able to make a credible confession of their faith. Calvin apparently thought this was possible at age 12.

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