



Paedocommunion and the Reformed confessions

Though churches of the Reformation are committed to the principle of *sola Scriptura*, which requires that the Scriptures be regarded as the supreme standard for their faith and practice, they are not indifferent to the lessons of church history. Nor are they indifferent to the tradition of Scriptural interpretation that is embodied in the confessions of the church. These confessions have an authority that is subordinate to Scripture, but they nonetheless represent an acknowledged consensus regarding what the Scriptures teach. When it comes to the question of paedocommunion, it is not enough to consider the practice of the churches throughout history. It is also necessary to study what the Reformed churches have confessed regarding who are the proper recipients of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Before we turn in our study of paedocommunion to the Scriptures' teaching regarding the proper recipients of the Lord's Supper, therefore, we need to complete our consideration of the history of the church by turning our attention to the Reformed confessions.

In the classic confessions of the Reformed churches, which were written during the period of the Reformation in the sixteenth century and the early seventeenth century, there is compelling evidence that the Reformed churches believe that the Lord's Supper ought to be administered only to professing believers. These confessions express a comprehensive understanding of the sacraments as an indispensable means whereby the grace of Christ is communicated to his people. They affirm that the children of believers, together with their parents, are recipients of the gospel promise and ought accordingly to receive the sacrament of baptism, which is a sign and seal of their incorporation into Christ and membership in the covenant community, the church. However, they also insist that such children, prior to their reception at the Table of the Lord, require instruction in the Christian faith in order that they might be prepared to receive properly the body and blood of Christ in the sacrament. Advocates of paedocommunion often argue that there is an inconsistency in this practice of admitting children into the covenant community through baptism, while withholding the sacrament of the Lord's Supper until such children have been instructed in and professed their faith before the church. In the opinion of proponents of paedocommunion, the insistence that the children of covenant first profess their faith before they are received at the Table of the Lord denies to them a privilege that ought to be extended to every covenant member.

It will not be my purpose in our consideration of the Reformed confessions to provide a full answer to this paedocommunionist objection. However, in order to evaluate the claims of advocates of paedocommunion, we need to have a clear understanding of the Reformed confessions' teaching so far as it bears upon the subject of the proper recipients of the sacraments. As we shall see in our summary of the confessions, their position on this subject derives from a more comprehensive view of the sacraments' role as means of grace that accompany the preaching of the gospel. The advocacy of paedocommunion not only touches upon the question of the proper recipients of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. It also touches upon the more basic issues of the nature of the sacraments and the obligations they place upon those who receive them. Indeed, the notion that children should be admitted to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, which is the principal interest of those who advocate paedocommunion, has more farreaching implications than many paedocommunionists often admit. Whether these implications are consistent with essential features of the Reformed view of the sacraments remains to be seen. Here it needs only be observed that we can hardly isolate the question of paedocommunion from the broader framework of traditional Reformed teaching regarding the sacraments.

In order to summarize the Reformed confessions on the subject of paedocommunion, we will begin with a review of their understanding of the nature and use of the sacraments in general. Within this framework of the doctrine of the sacraments, we will then take up the particular question of the proper recipients of the sacraments, especially the Lord's Supper.

The relation of the Word and sacraments

The doctrine of the sacraments belongs, in the structure of the Reformed confessions, to the doctrine of the church and her ministry. Those whom God the Father elects to save in Jesus Christ become beneficiaries of his saving work in no other way than through communion with the church. Though the ancient dictum of Cyprian, "*outside the church there is no salvation*" (*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*) is not explicitly echoed in all of the Reformed confessions, they commonly affirm that saving fellowship with Christ does not ordinarily occur apart from the church's official ministry of Word and sacrament. Christ's saving presence in the world is mediated through the church and the means of grace entrusted to her. Where the true church of Jesus Christ is manifest, there Christ is present gathering, defending, and preserving for himself a people chosen unto everlasting life. Christ is pleased to communicate himself by the working of his Spirit through the administration of the Word of God in preaching and sacrament. Where the Word of God is faithfully preached and the sacraments rightly administered — the two marks of the true church uniformly stipulated in the confessions — there we may be sure Christ is present by his Spirit imparting his saving benefits to his people. The location of the doctrine of the sacraments in the confessions, therefore, confirms their importance as necessary marks of the presence of the true church of Christ and as indispensable means to communicate God's grace in Christ to his people.

In their exposition of the "outward means" that Christ has appointed in the church for the purpose of communicating the "benefits of his mediation," the confessions grant a priority to the preaching of the gospel in relation to the sacraments. The sacraments do not communicate anything other than the grace of God in Christ, the same grace that is primarily and firstly communicated through the preaching of the gospel. Apart from the Word of the gospel, the visible word of the sacrament would be empty and lifeless. In the confessions, there is a clear ordering of Word and sacrament, such that the sacrament follows upon or is "added" to the Word as a kind of auxiliary means of grace. If the sacrament is to be administered properly, it must be preceded by an exposition of the biblical Word and promise which the sacrament signifies and seals. Failure to administer the sacrament in conjunction with the Word, represents a misunderstanding of the nature of the sacraments as "appendices" to the Word. For this reason, it is permissible to speak of the preaching of the Word as the "first" or "preeminent" means of grace, and of the sacrament as the "second" and "subordinate" means of grace. This relative priority of preaching in relation to the sacraments is well expressed, for example, in the Heidelberg Catechism, which affirms that "*the Holy Spirit ... works (faith) in our hearts by the preaching of the holy gospel, and confirms it by the use of the holy sacraments*" (Q. & A. 65). Faith is produced by the Spirit's ministry through the Word; it is only *confirmed* by the proper use of the sacraments.

This raises a question that has been disputed in the history of the Reformed tradition: Are the sacraments necessary and indispensable to the communication of God's grace in Christ? Or is the preaching of the Word of God a sufficient means of grace, apart from the sacraments? The best answer to this question, and the one that most faithfully represents the doctrine of the Reformed confessions, must be that ordinarily the sacraments are necessary and indispensable. The indispensability of the sacraments, however, is not absolute, but consequent upon the Lord's appointment of the sacraments for the believer's benefit. Because the Lord has appointed the sacraments for the church's use and added them to the preaching of the Word, it would be disobedience to his will to neglect their use. Furthermore, because they have been added to the Word, in view of the believer's weakness and proneness to doubt the gospel promise in Christ, neglecting the sacraments would betray an ingratitude and false sense of security on the part of the church. Though it may be necessary to posit (by way of exception in extraordinary circumstances) the possibility of the grace of Christ being communicated apart from the sacraments, the ordinary means Christ uses require the sacraments. To neglect the use of the sacraments represents a failure to appreciate the intimate conjunction of Word and sacraments in

the divine economy of grace. For just as the sacraments require the preceding Word, so the Word, by virtue of Christ's appointment, calls for the accompanying sacrament.

The distinctive nature of the sacraments

The typical definition of the sacraments in the Reformed confessions speaks of them as "visible signs and seals" of an "invisible grace." What is peculiar to the sacramental communication of God's grace in Christ is the appointment or consecration of visible elements that represent to the eye of faith the truth of the believer's saving fellowship with Christ. The water of baptism, for example, is a visible representation of the washing away of sins through the blood of Christ and the regeneration of the Holy Spirit. There is a divinely-appointed correspondence between the visible sign and the grace to which it points. Moreover, the sacraments are given by God to confirm and attest the promise of the gospel. Not only are they signs that visibly represent, but they are also seals that authenticate and assure the believer of the truth of the gospel promise. The Reformed confessions are fond of insisting that the believer is assured by the visible sign and seal of the sacrament that the grace of God in Christ is for the one who receives it by faith. Though the sign and seal do not add anything to the promise, they do constitute a more "full" or "open" confirmation of the gospel so that the believer's faith is fortified.

All of the Reformed confessions grope for words to express simultaneously the most *intimate conjunction* between the sacramental sign and the grace signified, as well as the *necessary distinction* between them. Consistent with the nature of sacraments, the Lord has appointed the sign as a visible representation and confirmation of the gospel. However, the visible representation and confirmation are not to be confused with the spiritual reality to which they point. The water of baptism is not to be confused with the blood of Christ or the washing of the Holy Spirit. The bread and wine of the Lord's Supper, likewise, are not to be confused with the body and blood of Christ. In sacramental language, we may speak of the sign as though it were the reality, so intimate is the divinely appointed connection between them. But lest we fall prey to idolatry, worshiping the sacramental element rather than the mediator, Jesus Christ, to whom the element refers, we must distinguish between them. The "substance" to which the sacramental sign points can only be Jesus Christ himself in all of his saving presence and power.

Furthermore, the confessions consistently teach that the power and efficacy of the sacraments require that they be received by faith. Since the sacraments do not add anything new to the grace of Christ promised in the gospel, and since the sacramental elements are not to be confused with the spiritual reality to which they refer, the sacraments require the same response as the Word. No more than the preaching of the gospel does the administration of the sacrament savingly communicate the grace of Christ, unless the gospel promise is believed or appropriated by an active faith on the part of its recipient. The Holy Spirit who authors faith through the preaching of the Word, also uses the sacraments to confirm and nourish faith. The sacraments function instrumentally to communicate the grace of God in Christ, but only when the Holy Spirit works through them to strengthen the believer in faith. Consistent with this emphasis upon the believing reception of the sacraments, the Reformed confessions consistently oppose any doctrine of *sacramental regeneration* apart from the Spirit's working faith through the Word. The sacraments do not work simply by virtue of their administration (*ex opere operato*), so long as the recipient does not interpose any obstacle (*obex*) to the reception of the grace they confer. Though they do genuinely serve, as means of grace, to *confer* and to *communicate* the grace of God in Christ, they do so only as the Spirit is working through them and as they confirm the faith required on the part of their recipients.

The sacraments are, in the nature of the case, visible signs and seals that the Lord alone can appoint for the use and benefit of the church. Because they require divine authorization, the church may not appoint as sacraments any church rite or practice, however useful, that she pleases. Just as in the old covenant, so also in the new, the Lord has appointed only two sacraments for the use of his people, holy baptism and the Lord's Supper. Therefore, the Roman Catholic doctrine that speaks of seven sacraments, represents an abuse of church authority and undermines its claim to be the true church of Jesus Christ. In order to appreciate the Reformed confessions' understanding

of the proper recipients of the Lord's Supper, we need to consider each of these sacraments specifically, and to note the differences between them.

1. *Baptism – A sacrament of incorporation*

The first sacrament that Christ has appointed for the church is holy baptism. By the Lord's ordinance and appointment, the sacramental sign of baptism is pure water. Only a lawfully ordained minister of the Word is authorized to administer this sacrament, and he must do so using the words of institution given by Christ in Matthew 28:19. Though the mode of baptism may differ from place to place — whether through immersion, effusion, or sprinkling — the validity of baptism requires the use of the Christ-appointed sign of water and the gospel Word regarding the baptized member's communion with the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The sacrament of baptism, which by its nature may be administered only once, serves to signify and seal to believers their adoption into the household of God and incorporation into Christ. The water of baptism especially represents the washing away of sin through the blood of Christ and the Spirit of regeneration. By baptism, believers are not only visibly distinguished from those who remain "strangers" to God and Christ's church, but they are also assured of the grace of reconciliation with God and purification from the pollution and guilt of sin. Moreover, as those who are distinguished as members of Christ and the household of God, believers are also by baptism enlisted into the service of Christ, engaged to him as those who are his cherished possession, and called to live in love with all others who enjoy communion with Christ. Though the emphasis in the Reformed confessions falls upon the privileges of grace which are signified and sealed to believers in baptism, the Westminster Larger Catechism especially emphasizes these accompanying obligations of baptism. Just as the required response to the Word of the gospel includes repentance and faith, so the required response to the visible Word of the sacrament includes corresponding responsibilities and privileges. These purposes of baptism are not restricted to the occasion of its administration. Rather, throughout the entire course of the believer's life, the sacrament of baptism serves powerfully and effectively to confirm faith and stimulate obedience. To use the language of the Westminster Larger Catechism, believers must be vigilant in the constant "improvement" of their baptism, being reminded by this sacrament of their engagement to Christ and enrollment in the company of his people.

Though the Reformed confessions do not teach baptismal regeneration, they do ascribe a real efficacy to the sacrament of baptism in conferring the grace of God in Christ upon believers. A cursory reading of the descriptions of the function and effect of baptism in these confessions indicates that they affirm a real connection between the sacramental sign and the spiritual reality signified. Again and again, the sacrament of baptism is described as that which effects, or brings about, what is visibly represented and pledged. As a divinely appointed instrument for the confirmation of faith, it could not be otherwise. For if the sacrament were of little or no effect as a means of grace — merely a visible testimony to the believer's subjective state and disposition toward God, and not a divinely given sacramental Word signifying and sealing divine grace in Christ — then it would not have been added to the Word as a more full confirmation of God's grace. Because God has been willing to join the spiritual grace communicated with its sacramental sign, the church must not weaken its understanding of the sacrament's power by "breaking asunder" what God has joined together.

In their handling of the question, who should be baptized?, the Reformed confessions consistently affirm that baptism should be administered not only to believers but also to their children. The affirmation of the baptism of children of believing parents is treated more expansively in the later confessions of the Reformation era, which reflect the continuing and intensifying polemic against the Anabaptist repudiation of infant baptism. According to the confessions, the children of believing parents must be baptized for the same reason as their believing parents: God is pleased to extend the gospel promise to them. The ground for the baptism of children of believers is their divinely promised inclusion in the church and covenant of Jesus Christ. Therefore, as members of Christ and recipients of the gospel promise, their baptism has the same meaning as the baptism of adult believers. Consistent with the Reformed understanding of the divine initiative in election and the communication of God's grace in Christ to his people, the baptism of children of believing parents

attests to their adoption into the household of God, and the washing away of their sins through the blood of Christ and the Spirit of regeneration.

Several biblical considerations are adduced in the confessions to support the practice of the baptism of children of believing parents: God's gracious promise to them; their inclusion within the covenant people of God; the fact that the kingdom of God belongs to them; the Old Testament precedent of the sacrament of circumcision, which in the New Testament has been replaced by baptism; and the Old Testament practice of offering a lamb of purification at the birth of a child, which was a sacrament of Jesus Christ. No more than in the case of believers are children baptized on the basis of a presumed regeneration or any other subjective condition (such as an "infant faith" or the faith of the parents in lieu of their own). Since the power and efficacy of the sacrament of baptism, as is the case with the sacraments generally, depend upon a believing reception of the sacramentally communicated Word of grace, the baptized children of believers are under the obligations to believe and repent that accompany the privileges of their baptism. Moreover, because the sacramental sign and seal are to be distinguished from the spiritual grace that they confirm, the efficacy of baptism may not be tied to the moment of its administration. This does not diminish the efficacy of baptism, but only acknowledges that its power may not be immediately exhibited.

2. *The Lord's Supper — A sacrament of nourishment*

The second sacrament that Christ has appointed for his church is the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Unlike the sacrament of baptism, which is a sign and seal of incorporation into Christ and his church, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is a sign and seal of God's grace in Christ that continually nourishes and strengthens the faith of its recipient.

With respect to the frequency of its administration and reception, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is clearly distinguished in the Reformed confessions from the sacrament of baptism. Whereas baptism is a rite of initiation or incorporation into Christ and his body, the church, the Lord's Supper is a rite of continual confirmation, nourishment and strengthening of the faith of believers. Baptism is by its nature a one-time ordinance. The Lord's Supper is by its nature a sacrament that needs to be repeated and thereby continually used by believers. Though the Reformed confessions do not explicitly comment on the frequency of the administration of the Lord's Supper, they favor in principle a practice where the sacrament of the Lord's Supper ordinarily accompanies the preaching of the gospel. Stated negatively, there are no clear confessional reasons that the sacrament of the Lord's Supper should not regularly be appended to the administration of the gospel in preaching. The requirements for a proper participation in the Supper — self-examination and the guarding of the Table against its profanation by unworthy participation on the part of the unbelieving and impenitent — might well present practical impediments to the regular, even weekly, celebration of the Supper. But, with the possible exception of the Westminster Larger Catechism, which provides a detailed description regarding the preparation for and use of the sacrament, none of the great confessions of the Reformed churches offers any argument against frequent communion.

In the Reformed confessions the Lord's Supper is variously described and several of its purposes are identified.

Perhaps the most basic metaphor governing the descriptions of the Lord's Supper is that of a *sacred meal*, which was instituted to nourish believers in their communion with Christ. The sacramental elements of bread and wine were consecrated to serve as tokens and pledges of Christ himself, whose body given and blood shed are the spiritual sustenance and life of believers. By sharing this sacramental meal, believers enjoy a rich communion with Christ and with all his members. They commune with Christ under the veil of the sacramental elements, and acknowledge him to be their food and drink unto life eternal. Reflecting this emphasis upon the sacrament as a nourishing meal, the Reformed confessions typically denominate the sacrament as "the Lord's Supper" or "the Lord's table." Even as the physical body is strengthened by bread and wine, so the spiritual life of believers is strengthened by the eating and drinking of Christ, who is the spiritual food of those who belong to him by faith.

Consistent with the understanding of the Lord's Supper as a spiritual meal in which the believer enjoys communion with and is nourished by the Lord, the Reformed confessions also speak of the sacrament as a memorial of Christ's death and sacrifice upon the cross. Though the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is not merely a *memorial* or occasion for thanksgiving to God — the Zwinglian doctrine of the sacrament is uniformly, though often only implicitly, repudiated as inadequate — through it the church commemorates and proclaims Christ's death until he comes again at the end of the age. For this reason, the sacrament is also an occasion for thanksgiving and praise — a eucharistic meal whose character is not only one of reverent commemoration but also one of joyful thankfulness. When believers receive the elements as tokens of Christ's body and blood, they do so in gratitude to God for all of the benefits of salvation which are theirs through Christ.

The sacrament, which as a visible sign of an invisible grace serves to confirm and strengthen faith in the promises of the gospel, also evokes thanksgiving by *assuring* believers of their participation in Christ and his saving work. To use the language of the confessions, as assuredly as believers take the bread and the wine from the hand of Christ's ministers, so assuredly are they given to believe that Christ's work was for them. Indeed, it was for this reason that the Lord graciously and mercifully appointed the sacrament. Knowing the weakness and uncertainty that often characterize the faith of believers, the Lord instituted this sacramental meal as a visible representation of his work on their behalf. Lest the gospel promise, first announced through the preaching of the Word, be doubted, God has graciously condescended to our weakness in appointing this means to aid our faith.

Because the sacramental meal of the Lord's Supper is a *holy communion* with Christ, it also serves the purposes of uniting believers more intimately with him and calling them to a life of loving obedience and holy consecration. Believers, when they commemorate and proclaim the reconciling work of Christ in the sacrament, are reminded of their calling to be united to and reconciled with fellow believers. Those who are joined through the sacrament in communion with Christ are likewise joined with all who are his members. Furthermore, as members who enjoy the most intimate and full communion with Christ, they are engaged to a life that is marked by love and obedience to him. Those who share this meal with Christ are called to live in greater intimacy with Christ and his members. Failure to live in communion with Christ or to love those who share this communion with him is a manifest denial of the nature and significance of this sacred meal.

On the much-disputed question of the nature of Christ's *real presence* in the sacrament, the Reformed confessions typically affirm this presence in strong terms. But they do so with an accompanying denial of the explanations of that presence traditionally offered by the Roman Catholic Church or the Lutheran tradition.

According to the Reformed confessions, those who receive Christ through the sacrament with the mouth of faith genuinely partake of him. Believers enjoy through the sacrament a true participation in and reception of the body and blood of Christ. The sacramental signs of bread and wine, though not to be confused or identified with the actual body and blood of Christ, genuinely communicate Christ to believers. The sacramental acts of eating and drinking are instrumental to a communication of Christ *with* the sacramental signs. In several of the confessions, the language used to describe Christ's presence is quite robust. Believers are said to partake through the sacrament of "*the proper and natural body and the proper blood of Christ.*" The spiritual eating and drinking that takes place in the sacrament involves such an intimate participation in Christ that the believer becomes altogether one with him, bone of his bone, flesh of his flesh.

However, when it comes to providing an explanation of the manner of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper, the Reformed Confessions object vigorously to the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation and the Lutheran doctrine of consubstantiation. The Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation improperly identifies the sacramental elements with the spiritual reality that they represent. The earthly elements of the sacrament become the actual body and blood of Christ, though remaining under the form or appearance of bread and wine. Whether received by faith or not, the consecrated elements are objectively the body and blood of Christ, and remain what they have become until they are properly consumed.

Moreover, in this doctrine the eating and drinking of Christ is a physical act, an “eating with the mouth” (*manducatio oralis*) which is a physical rather than a spiritual participation in Christ. Likewise, though the Lutheran doctrine of consubstantiation does not improperly identify the sacramental signs with the thing signified, nonetheless it teaches that the actual body and blood of Christ are *locally* present in the sacrament. This doctrine also affirms an “eating with the mouth” (*manducatio oralis*) that fails to appreciate the spiritual nature of the believer’s participation in Christ through the sacrament. Contrary to these doctrines of Christ’s presence, therefore, the Reformed confessions simply affirm the believers’ eating and drinking of the natural body and blood of Christ. This occurs through an inexpressible and incomprehensible working of the Spirit of Christ, who draws believers through the sacrament up to Christ who is in heaven in order that they might be joined in communion with him.

In their criticism of the Roman Catholic doctrine of Christ’s presence in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, the Reformed confessions typically express several key objections to the Roman Catholic doctrine of the mass. The objection to the doctrine of transubstantiation is not only addressed to the problem of the adoration of the consecrated elements, which is a form of idolatry and an inappropriate identification of the sign with the thing signified. But it is also addressed to the idea that Christ’s presence in the sacrament is the basis for the unbloody sacrifice of Christ in the mass. The priest who ministers at the altar in the Roman Catholic mass offers Christ himself as a propitiation and sacrifice for sin. Though this sacrifice is an unbloody re-presentation of Christ’s sacrifice upon the cross, it obtains further grace and merit for those who participate and even for those who may not be present (the dead).

Furthermore, the administration of the mass includes or permits a number of unbiblical practices: the elevation and adoration of the host, the withholding of the cup from the laity, the communing on the part of the priests or clergy without the presence or participation of the laity, and private masses for individuals or portions of the whole body of the church. These and a host of additional ceremonies constitute an affront to the exclusive priesthood of Christ, whose one sacrifice is sufficient to the needs of his people, and betray a superstitious and magical view of the working of the sacrament.

Though it might seem that our extended discussion of the Reformed confessions’ view of the sacraments has taken us far afield of the specific question of paedocommunion, the position of the confessions on this question can only be understood within the broader framework of its doctrine of the sacraments in general. The insistence of the confessions that the recipients of the Lord’s Supper be professing believers arises out of their general teaching regarding the nature and power of the sacraments. When the confessions insist upon the presence of faith on the part of the recipient of the Lord’s Supper, they do so for reasons that correspond to their more comprehensive view of the sacraments.

As we have noted in the foregoing, the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, because it is a visible representation and confirmation of the gospel promise in Christ, *requires faith* on the part of its participants. Because the sacrament visibly signifies and seals the promises of the gospel, it demands the same response as the gospel. No more than the gospel Word does the sacrament work merely by virtue of its administration (*ex opere operato*). Only by a spiritual eating and drinking by the mouth of faith does the sacrament work to communicate Christ to his people. Therefore, the Roman Catholic teaching of an objective presence of Christ in the sacramental elements, irrespective of a believing response to the gospel Word which the sacrament confirms, is rejected. Not only does this Roman Catholic view improperly identify the sacramental sign and the spiritual reality it signifies, but it maintains that Christ is objectively present before, during, and even after the administration of the elements whether or not those participating (or not participating) actively accept the gospel in faith and repentance.

In the Reformed confessions, moreover, the kind of faith that is competent to remember, proclaim and receive Christ through the Lord’s Supper is carefully defined. Before members of the church may receive the sacrament, they have a biblical mandate to engage in self-examination. This self-examination requires that the believers test their faith against the normative requirements of the Word of God. Essential to such faith are the acknowledgment of the believer’s sin and unworthiness, the recognition that Christ alone by his mediatorial work has made atonement for the sins of his people,

and a resolution to live in holiness and obedience to his will. In this way believers are called actively to embrace the promises of the gospel that the sacrament visibly confirm in the same way as they respond to the preaching of the gospel. Furthermore, it is the duty of the ministers and elders of the church to oversee the administration of the sacrament, preventing so far as they are able those from participating who are unbelieving or living an ungodly life. Since Christ has instituted the sacrament for the purpose of nourishing the faith of believers, it would violate the nature of the sacrament to invite the unbelieving or the impenitent to partake. Unworthy participation, that is, participation on the part of those who have not properly examined themselves or who are unbelieving, would profane the table of the Lord and be contemptuous of its ordained purpose.

Since this feature of the Reformed confessions' teaching touches directly upon the propriety of paedocommunion, we need to take particular note of the confessions teaching regarding the proper recipients of the sacrament.

The Belgic Confession, after noting that the recipient of the Lord's Supper receives the body and blood of the Lord "by faith (which is the hand and mouth of our soul)," speaks directly to this subject.

(We receive this holy sacrament in the assembly of the people of God, with humility and reverence, keeping up among us a holy remembrance of the faith and of the Christian religion. Therefore no one ought to come to this table without having previously rightly examined himself, lest by eating of this bread and drinking of this cup he eat and drink judgment to himself. In a word, we are moved by the use of this holy sacrament to a fervent love towards God and our neighbor.

(Article 35)

According to the language of this article, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper requires the active engagement of its recipients. Only believers, who are capable of remembering the faith and the Christian religion, may come to the Table in order to be nourished and fortified in the way of faith and love. With an obvious allusion to the apostle Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 11, this Confession also insists upon a proper preparation on the part of believers for the reception of the sacrament. Only those who have previously examined themselves should partake of the bread and the cup, lest they should eat and drink judgment unto themselves.

In its extensive treatment of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, the Heidelberg Catechism also expressly addresses the question of those for whom the sacrament is instituted.

Q. For whom is the Lord's supper instituted?

A. For those who are truly displeased with themselves for their sins and yet trust that these are forgiven them for the sake of Christ, and that their remaining infirmity is covered by His passion and death; who also desire more and more to strengthen their faith and amend their life. But hypocrites and such as turn not to God with sincere hearts eat and drink judgment to themselves.

It is important to observe that the three marks of true faith, which are identified in this question and answer, are the same as the three general headings of the Heidelberg Catechism. This is not accidental, since the purpose of the Catechism is to provide an instrument for the instruction of the children of believers in the Christian faith. True faith always includes three elements:

- 1) a conscious awareness of the believer's sin and misery;
- 2) an understanding of the person and work of Christ, who satisfied for the believer's sins by his cross and passion; and
- 3) a Spirit-worked readiness on the part of the believer to live in gratitude to God.

When the children of believing parents, who have received the sign and seal of incorporation into Christ through the sacrament of baptism, are instructed in these principal elements of the Christian religion, they are being invited to respond in faith to their baptism and to come believingly to the

Lord's Supper. Though this is not the place to answer the objections of proponents of paedocommunion, the teaching of the Heidelberg Catechism does not seem to create an artificial and unnecessary barrier before children who might otherwise be received at the Lord's Table. All believers who are received at the Lord's Table come in the same way and with the same obligations. Consistent with the nature of true faith (cf. Heidelberg Catechism Q. & A. 21), all believers who come to the Table of the Lord in order to be nourished in faith are expected to come believingly. If the sacrament is to be used to strengthen faith, it is only appropriate that those who receive the sacrament do so as professing believers.

That this is the consensus view of the Reformed confessions is also evident from the Westminster Standards. In Chapter XXIX.vii of The Westminster Confession of Faith, the necessity of a believing participation in the Lord's Supper is clearly affirmed:

"Worthy receivers (of the Lord's Supper), outwardly partaking of the visible elements, in this sacrament, do then also, 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."

Since the Lord's Supper is a sacrament that nourishes faith, it requires faith on the part of those who receive it. Perhaps the most relevant statements of the confessions in respect to the question of paedocommunion, is found in the Westminster Larger Catechism. In answer to a question about the difference between the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, the Larger Catechism states:

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.

(Q. & A. 177)

According to the Larger Catechism, baptism and the Lord's Supper differ in terms of what they signify and seal. Baptism signifies and seals to its recipients their regeneration and ingrafting into Christ. The Lord's Supper signifies and seals to its recipients their continuance and growth in believing union with Christ. Whereas baptism is administered but once to believers and their children, the Lord's Supper is administered often *"to such as are of years and ability to examine themselves."* Though the Larger Catechism does not spell out what it means by the expression *"of years and ability to examine themselves,"* it transparently reflects the confession and practice of the Reformed churches, which has historically required a public ceremony of profession of faith on the part of the children of believing parents prior to their reception at the Lord's Table. The purpose of such a profession of faith by the children of believing parents is to confirm publicly the kind of faith demanded by their baptism and to be the occasion for admitting them to the Lord's Table.

Conclusion

The uniform testimony of the Reformed confessions is that, though the children of believing parents ought to be baptized as a sacramental sign and seal of their incorporation into Christ, they may only receive the sacrament of the Lord's Supper upon an attestation of their faith in the gospel promise. Even though the practice of paedocommunion is not expressly rejected in these confessions, their general understanding of the nature and purpose of the sacraments stands opposed to this practice. Two emphases in the confessions especially militate against the practice of paedocommunion.

The first emphasis is the confessions' insistence that the sacraments do not communicate the grace of Christ apart from the preaching of the gospel, in relation to which they are confirming signs. The principal means whereby Christ dwells among and communicates himself to his people is the preaching of the gospel. Through the preaching of the gospel, the Holy Spirit produces faith in the hearts and minds of believers. Indeed, the saving power of the gospel Word is only communicated to those in whom such faith lives by the working of the Holy Spirit. Because the

sacraments are visible signs and seals of the gospel promise, their effectiveness, like that of the Word they visibly proclaim, also requires a believing reception on the part of their beneficiaries. Just as the gospel Word is received through faith, so the sacramental pledges and seals of the gospel require faith on the part of their recipients. Though the children of believers are to be baptized, since they together with their parents are included in the covenant community, their baptism summons them to the same believing response that the gospel Word demands. Baptism, no more than the Lord's Supper, does not work by its mere administration. It only serves to confirm and bolster faith, which is principally worked by the Holy Spirit through the gospel. Therefore, consistent with their emphasis upon the priority of the Spirit's use of the preaching of the gospel to produce faith, *the confessions insist that the route from the baptismal font to the Lord's Table can only be taken in the way of an active response of faith.* To argue that baptism alone is a sufficient basis for admitting the children of believers to the Lord's Table, would require a substantial change in the way the confessions understand the use and effectiveness of the sacraments in relation to the preaching of the Word.

The second emphasis is the confessions' view of the difference between the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Whereas baptism is a once-for-all sign and seal of incorporation into Christ and His church, the Lord's Supper is a frequently administered sign and seal of the gospel that nourishes faith, which the Spirit produces by means of the Word. Because the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is designed to nourish and strengthen faith, it requires a prior attestation of the presence of such faith on the part of its recipients. Though the language may be a little misleading, the Lord's Supper, unlike baptism, requires for its proper reception an *active and believing* participation in Christ. Believers are summoned at the Table of the Lord to *"take, eat, remember and believe."* The purpose of the catechetical instruction of children of believing parents is to prepare them to make a credible confession of faith, which in the traditional practice of the Reformed churches is effected by means of a *"public profession of faith."* Unless such faith has been publicly attested, the children of believers are not yet prepared to make proper use of the sacrament that Christ has appointed for the specific purpose of nourishing faith.

Admittedly, the Reformed confessions do not stipulate a particular age at which such a profession should be made. Nor do they spell out in detail the kind of instruction in the faith that ought ordinarily to precede a mature profession of faith and admission to the Lord's Table. However, they clearly insist, in keeping with the nature of the sacraments in general and of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper in particular, that the straight line that leads from the baptismal font to the Lord's Table includes along the way a confirmation of the baptized believer's embrace of the promise of the gospel. Though baptism summons the children of believers to faith and therefore to the Table of the Lord, it does not constitute a sufficient condition for their admission to the Table. Baptism summons its recipient to faith, whose presence must first be publicly attested before the believer comes to the Table of the Lord.

To state the matter in a different way, the admission of children to the Table of the Lord without a prior attestation of their faith would require a substantial change in the historic Reformed understanding of the nature and use of the sacraments. If advocates of paedocommunion are able to demonstrate that such a change is demanded by the teaching of Scripture, then the confessions should be revised, of course. This is the obvious implication of the church's confession that the Scriptures must always remain the supreme standard for the church's faith and practice. Our consideration of the Reformed confessions, however, indicates that advocates of paedocommunion bear a significant burden of proof to show the basis for and extent of such revisions that this practice would require. No one should be under the illusion that anything less would be required.

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