

The Admission of Covenant Children to Full Communicant Membership A Session Approved Summary of Principles

Introduction:

Pastoral Question:

- When should a covenant child be admitted to the Lord's Supper?

The Pastoral Issues

- Concern for the spiritual welfare and long term flourishing of our covenant children
 - The Blessing of the Lord's Supper as a RENEWAL sacrament (distinguished from Baptism as a Converting Sacrament).
 - The importance in Christian spirituality for there to be a genuine process of self discovery in Christian conversion (whether gradual or immediate) with significant consequences relative to their long term experience of assurance and practice in sanctification.
 - The Biblical warnings as to the danger in participating in the Lord's Supper "unworthily."

Biblical Context:

1Cor. 11:27 *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.*

Observations:

- *Clearly, it is NOT necessarily a benefit to partake of the Lord's Supper—and in fact can be a curse! Why Paul, and we after him, should understand and execute the terms very carefully!*
- **"worthy manner"??**
 - Clarified by: **28** *Let a person examine himself, and **then** so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.*
- **Examine him/herself...???**
 - Clarified by: **29** *For anyone who eats and drinks without **discerning** the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.*
 - *"Discerning..." vs. what exactly, assenting, professing without personal experience or credible profession, without some kind of "testing" or "trial" relative to ones self-awareness and experience?*
 - *Note then 1 Cor 13:5*
2 Cor. 13:5 ***Examine yourselves**, to see whether you are in the faith. **Test yourselves**.*
 - Point: This is a classic Pauline restatement wherein "test yourselves" further clarifies "examine yourselves"
 - Note Context: This passage seems to be a restatement of exactly what Paul wrote relative to communion table in 1 Cor 11, especially given the context of 2 Cor 5 with respect to instruction on excommunication.
 - Note Also Mt. 7:22—and the clear distinction assumed between possible "profession of faith" and "credible profession of faith" due either to the lack of personal experience of the vital graces inherent in faith or perhaps even false testimony...

Matt. 7:22 *On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?'*

- Note also immediate context in 1 Cor 10 as to discern not only the meaning/implications of “participation/koinonia” with Christ, but also Christ body relative to all the responsibilities and privileges inherent to membership in the body of Christ. (c.f. 2 Cor 5)

1Cor. 10:14 *Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. 15 I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. 16 The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? 17 Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.?*

Note: What must be “discerned” personally as to be “tested” lest the admonishments by Paul in 1 Cor 10 are rendered meaningless? If you are listening to a profession of faith, what would you need to observe that the person “discerns?”

How is all this discerned in our confessional consensus?

Confessional Context

WCF and Larger Catechism description of “worthy” participants of the Lord’s Supper:

- WCF 29:

7. Worthy receivers, 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: the body and blood of Christ being then, not corporally or carnally, in, with, or under the bread and wine; yet, as really, but spiritually, present to the faith of believers in that ordinance, as the elements themselves are to their outward senses.

8. Although ignorant and wicked men receive the outward elements in this sacrament; yet, they receive not the thing signified thereby; but, by their unworthy coming thereunto, are guilty of the body of the Lord, to their own damnation. Wherefore, all ignorant and ungodly persons, as they are unfit to enjoy communion with Him, so are they unworthy of the Lord's table; and cannot, without great sin against Christ, while they remain such, partake of these holy mysteries, or be admitted thereunto.

- What does “ignorant” mean—unable to profess? Or unable to have a “credible profession”

Note then the “principal” (or essential) acts involved in saving faith (e.g. a self-discerned faith, credible faith, mature faith, adult faith, etc) involves progress from “accepting” to “receiving” to “resting.”

WCF 14:2-- ... the principal acts of saving faith are accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace.

- What is involved in “accepting, receiving and resting??

LC Question 177: *Wherein do the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper differ?*

Answer: 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.***

- BCO implicitly acknowledges by the above that not all “profession” show “discretion” (“discernment”) even as this is ordinarily related to some degree of natural development (“years of discretion”) and a process through personal experience of self discovery and examination (“for themselves..) or conversion! (Again, conversion that can be either immediate or gradual, but with a clear sense of “once... but not” at least conceptually in relation to experientially). Thus,

BCO 28-3. The Church should maintain constant and sympathetic relations with the children. It also should encourage them, on coming to **years of discretion**, to make confession of the Lord Jesus Christ and to enter upon **all** privileges of full church membership. If they are wayward they should be cherished by the church and every means used to reclaim them.

BCO 57-5. The time having come for the making of a public profession, and those who have been approved by the Session having taken their places in the presence of the congregation, the minister may state that:

***“Of the number of those who were baptized in infancy as members of the Church of God by birthright, and as heirs of the covenant promises, the Session has examined and approved (call them by name), who come now to assume **for themselves** the **full privileges and responsibilities** of their inheritance in the household of faith.**”*

BCO insistence that “all” or “full” responsibilities and privileges of church membership be granted, by rights of their full communicant membership in Christ is also spelled out. By implications, whatever one needs in terms of personal and mature faith such as to have rights to the “full privileges/responsibilities” of church membership are assumed in the personal and spiritual maturity as to be admitted to the Lord’s Supper, and vice versa:

BCO examples:

6-4. *“Those only who have made a profession of faith in Christ, have been baptized, and admitted by the Session to the Lord's Table, are entitled to all the rights and privileges of the church. (See BCO 57-4 and 58-4)*

20.3 *“All communing members in good and regular standing, but no others, are entitled to vote in the churches to which they are respectively attached. (c.f. 25:1ff)*

25.7 *“All the communing members on the roll of that church shall be members of the corporation. The officers of the corporation, whether they be given the title trustee or some other title, shall be elected from among the members of the corporation in a regularly constituted congregational meeting.”*

43.1 *“It is the right of any communing member of the Church in good standing to make complaint against any action of a court to whose jurisdiction he is subject,”*

Significant Historical Commentary:

Commenting then on John 6:63—**“the flesh is useless”** John Calvin says:

The ancients fell into a gross error by supposing that little children were deprived of eternal life, if

they did not dispense to them the Eucharist, that is, the Lord's Supper . . . With respect to young children, the ordinance of Christ forbids them to partake of the Lord's Supper; because they are not yet able to know or to celebrate the remembrance of the death of Christ . . . For it is certain, that he now speaks of the perpetual and ordinary manner of eating the flesh of Christ, which is done by faith only.

Concerning the confessions mention of the "first class of people" excluded from the Lord's table in so far as they remain in "a state of ignorance" (attributed to a developmental immaturity or having not yet reached the "years of discretion" 19th century pastor Ashbel Green comments:

"to children, or to any who are grossly ignorant of the fundamental principles of the Christian religion, whatever may be their age, all individuals who are absolutely incapable of that examination which the divine command explicitly enjoins." (Ashbel Green, Lectures on the Shorter Catechism of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, Vol. II, Presbyterian Board of Pub.: Philadelphia, 1841, p. 402)

Addendum: A Problem of Sacramental Confusion!

A Biblical High View of Both Sacraments relative to their intent will beg the question—"why a bias to rush children to the Lord's Table?"

- If Baptized Children are ordinarily "Christians," we accept at face value their unexamined/discerned profession of faith. Why then do we rush them to the Lord's Table—Perhaps related to a low view of baptism as only being signatory? False attempt at security? Parental Affirmation?

IF a person can wrongly participate in the Lord's Supper such as to bring harm upon themselves, ought we to bias toward making sure those who come are worthy participants?

Ironically, one reaction to Baptist theology has been to so re-affirm a child's covenant status such as to then import such status not only into the application of baptism but also the Lord's Supper. This is to conflate the meaning and application of the two sacraments as to be practically deny the distinction between a converting sacrament (such as to be a means of grace unto conversion) and a renewing sacrament (as to assume conversion such as to be remembered and renewed throughout the duration of life).

Famous example of this debate historically—J. Edwards vs. Stoddard and Woods(Half-way covenant debate)- excerpts from Edwards's, "Works, Vol. 1, Section 7 (www.ccel.org/ccel/edwards/works1.xi.iii.vii.html)

Mr. Stoddard expressly declares, That the Lord's supper is instituted to be a means of regeneration, (*Doct. of Inst. Churches*, p. 22. *a.*) instituted for the conversion of sinners, as well as the confirmation of saints; (*Appeal*, p. 70. c. p. 71. *a.*) that the direct end of it is conversion, when the subject that it is administered unto stands in need of conversion. (*Ibid.* p. 73, 74.) And thus Mr. W. after Mr. S. speaks of the Lord's supper *as by Christ's appointment a proper means of conversion* of some that are unconverted. (p. 100. e. 101. *a.*) so he speaks of it as *instituted* for the conversion of sinners. (p. 126, and 127.)... Mr. W. says, (p. 14. *d.*) "Since it is *God's will*, that his church should admit all such visible saints, [*viz.* such as he had been speaking of,] it follows, that the Lord's supper is a *converting* ordinance to such of them as are *unconverted*."

According to Marsden,

Stoddard was concerned first of all with fostering conversion through any God-given means possible. Opening the Lord's Supper was a tangible way to bring people into the presence of Christ's sacrifice and a sensibility of the

depths of their wickedness for which Christ had died.¹

Edward's View by Contrast:

Concerning "persons that are *adult* and in *good standing*... I think it is both evident by the word of God, and also granted on all hands, that none ought to be admitted as members of the visible church of Christ but *visible* and *professing saints*, or visible and professing Christians.²

By "visible and professing" Edward explained:

[They are] "are in the profession and appearance endowed with the christian grace or piety... their owning the christian covenant, their owning God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost to be their God; and by their visibly joining in the public prayers and singing God's praises, there is a show and implicit profession of supreme respect to God and love to him; by joining in the public confessions, they make a show of repentance; by keeping Sabbaths and hearing the word, they make a show of a spirit of obedience; by offering to come to sacraments, they make a show of love to Christ and a dependence on his sacrifice."³

i.e. Notice therefore what we believe about the two sacraments in their relative meaning and importance:

Sacraments Generally:

WCF 27:1-2-- A high view of sacrament believe there is a "spiritual (cause-effect) relation between the sign, and the thing signified" at least ordinarily (WCF 25)... ultimately predicated upon divine sovereign grace beginning with election.

- WCF 27:1-2-- "*Spiritual Relation . . . between the thing signified and the sign*" or means of grace.
 - *There is, in every sacrament, a spiritual relation, or sacramental union, between the sign and the thing signified: whence it comes to pass, that the names and effects of the one are attributed to the other.*
 - *C.f. WCF 10:3-- Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated, and saved by Christ, through the Spirit, who worketh when, and where, and how He pleaseth: so also are all other elect persons who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word.*
- (Read Mt.28:19, Titus 3:5, 1 Peter 3:21, Gal.3:27, 1Cor.12:13, Mark 16:16, Acts 2:38, Rom.6:3-4 and ask, does it not seem to "affect" salvation in some sense?)

WCF 27:3—grace IS conferred, albeit not necessarily, and not necessarily immediately

- NO-- Grace is NOT "conferred by any power in the signs themselves..."
- YES-- Grace IS "conferred upon the work of the Spirit..."

Baptism as a CONVERTING Sacrament:

1) What is signified in Christian **Baptism**? WCF 28.1

of his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life.

2) What is conferred? WCF 28.6

by the right use of this ordinance, the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited, and conferred, by the Holy Ghost, to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongeth unto, according to the counsel of God's own will, in His appointed time.

¹ George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 122.

² "Inquiry Concerning Qualifications for Communion," *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 434, 436.

³ *Ibid.* 438

Albeit Qualified:

- Not necessarily: WCF 28.5 *yet grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed unto it, as that no person can be regenerated, or saved, without it: or, that all that are baptized are undoubtedly regenerated.*
- Not necessarily immediately: WCF 28.6 *The efficacy of Baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered*

Application:

- Ordinarily but not necessarily (some do fall away) there is a spiritual cause-effect relation between the administration of Baptism and effectual calling such that covenant children are raised as “believers”
- There is no rush to the Lord’s Supper if for the sake of Christian assurance. For the child who professes faith in Christ prior to an age and/or experience of personal discernment (which can happen more immediately or gradually), we take a child’s unconfirmed profession of faith at face value. We don’t bias against a child who believes because his/her parents and church taught him/her to believe, even as this is ordinarily, in the context of the means of grace in the church, the very way God intends for many to be saved.

The Lord’s Supper as a RENEWAL sacrament:

1) What is signified in the **Lord’s Supper**? WCF 29.1 *of His body and blood, called the Lord’s Supper, to be observed in His Church, unto the end of the world, for the perpetual remembrance of the sacrifice of Himself in His death;*

2) What is conferred in the Lord’s Supper? **WCF 29.1** *the sealing all benefits thereof unto true believers, their spiritual nourishment and growth in Him, . . . to be a bond and pledge of their communion with Him, and with each other, as members of His mystical body.*

Albeit Qualified: Thus 29.7 and 8 7. Worthy receivers... etc. (see above)

APPLICATION:

High View of Lord’s Supper as a Renewing Ordinance—what does this assume?

- Assumes the experience of true Christian conversion
- What is necessary to experience a “conversion”? What self awareness in relation to the meaning of the gospel? At the very least, evidence of the capacity and experience of discerning “ I was dead but now I’m alive, I was lost but now I’m found”—again, even if discovered in the context of professing faith in Christ, albeit toward a “credible” profession of faith such as to renew for themselves what they have actually believed since the time they could think/speak even.

Possible Ruling of Session Relative to Children

- 1) Approve exam and admit to Lords Supper relative to a credible profession of faith
- 2) Not approve and instruct to give it some more time relative to a full and credible experience of Christian conversion relative to the experience of the gospel
- 3) ??? Admit based on prior admission but to advise against partaking until such time as can be approved in a credible profession of faith.