



### It Is An Offense to Deny Communion to Baptized Children

I had to leave my church service prior to communion one night recently because of the minister's reading of the basis for excluding children from the Table. How can I enjoy the Lord's Supper, when my younger brothers and sisters are being unjustifiably excluded? Could such be an offense against one of these little ones?

But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea.

Matthew 18:6, KJV.

Baptized children are members of the church at the time of their baptism. How then can a church justify denying communion to them? These churches do not deny them communion as a measure of church discipline, for they have committed no sin that requires discipline. No, the reasoning is much different, and it rests upon a presumption that denies in part the gospel itself.

The gospel message is so simple that even the simple-minded can grasp it. "For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called." I Cor. 1:26, KJV. In fact, the scripture seems to indicate that God takes the trouble of hiding the gospel from the wise and learned, "[f]or the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, 'He taketh the wise in their own craftiness.'" I Cor. 3:19, KJV. Jesus went so far as to say, "Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." Matthew 18:3, KJV. In any event, it is not intellectual capacity nor is it rhetorical ability to explain God's grace in Christ and Communion that is the qualification for participating; it's the grace of God alone which allows us to believe and enter the Kingdom.

Jesus used pictures and parables to teach people about the kingdom of God. One of those pictures is the act of eating food. "Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you." John 6:53, KJV. This offended some of his followers, so much so that he asked the twelve disciples whether they would also leave. But the childlike Peter replies: "Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God." John 6:68-9, KJV.

Jesus' simple pictures should have been illustrations helping people understand His kingdom, but because of wickedness, not lack of intelligence or education, people did not understand. "For this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they

should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them.” Matthew 13:15, KJV.

The church doesn't deny communion to mentally challenged adults, even though their understanding may not even arise to the level of a child. Nor does the church deny communion to the senile elderly or Alzheimer's victims. Ronald Reagan was still receiving communion after being diagnosed with Alzheimer's. The church legitimately denies communion as a form of church discipline, when a member is behaving in a way that is inconsistent with biblical standards. The person hasn't gone far enough to be excommunicated, but something about the member's life requires the church leadership to go beyond counseling and issue some form of discipline to bring them to repentance.

The picture of the gospel in communion is perfect for the young and the feeble-minded. They receive nourishment without effort, without works, without even having to understand fully what is happening. (What adult can adequately explain what occurs in the Lord's Supper, when Christ says, "This is my body, broken for you?") We give picture books to the very young, so that even before they can read, they can learn a story on their own. It prepares them for reading books later. The act of eating bread and drinking wine is the simplest of acts, and it pictures something for us (all of whom are children with respect to God by the way).

In order to survive, the newborn infant learns eating first, and the child learns that someone else – the parent - must provide nourishment to them. The gospel states that God, our parent, gives us grace and salvation through Christ, who is our living bread. He does so because He knows we need His grace, we are like rebellious, ignorant children who don't even know what we need until God deigns to open our eyes to the truth. Yet, we deny the opportunity to see this pictured to our younger members. Are they, because of their youth, less in need of the nourishment of the Lord's Supper than we adults are? The question is absurd on its face.

So, why would a church, which acknowledges the validity of infant baptism and that once baptized, the child becomes a member, deny communion to them? Ostensibly, it's because they're too young to understand what's happening. In fact, their understanding and maturity may be such as to cause them to drink the cup "unworthily, . . . not discerning the Lord's body." I Cor. 11:27, 29, KJV. In I Corinthians 11, Paul is speaking to adults who are getting drunk at communion and feasting while letting the poor barely get by or eat nothing. Such acts are a denial of the equality of each believer in the sight of God. Those people were "not discerning the Lord's body." It's so serious a denial of the gospel that such people are in danger of "falling asleep." I Cor. 11:30, KJV. And we fear that very young children, sitting in a communion service with their parents where no alcohol is served (another disobedience to the Lord's command about His supper), will engage in this kind of activity? Yeah, I don't get it either. Actually, we commit the sin of treating certain members (the young) as so much beneath us that they cannot partake at all. So who's guilty of not discerning the Lord's body in this situation?

So, what is the reason? The fear that God will kill children for "not discerning the Lord's body" is absurd. Is it some attitude that communion is so high and holy that children cannot attain to the spiritual dimension needed to respect it? Parents can teach the right attitude to their children. Children learn to respect communion

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at an early age, when taught to do so. But being denied it teaches them that they are outside the covenant instead of inside. It also teaches them that they have to be mature and intellectually able to handle it before they can receive the gift of God. But that's not the gospel; the gospel is that God's grace is a free gift, given by God to all who will receive it.

So, we're doing the exact opposite of what Jesus taught us to do with children. We're not suffering the little children to come to Him, we're not fully feeding the sheep (if communion actually nourishes, then they need it, just as we adults do), and we're teaching them that His grace is not a free gift but that it has to be earned with intellectual ability. Those three goals contradict perhaps the three most important effects that communion should have on young people – teaching the free grace of God, feeding his lambs, and teaching that even the least among us are entitled to the privilege of the Lord's Supper. And we wonder why they mistreat and exclude the lesser kids among them at school?!

The church should be zealous in promoting the three goals amongst the youngest – the free gift of the gospel of Christ, Christ's command to feed his lambs, and the fact that there is nothing you can bring in your hands (or intellect) in order to come to the Table. Without a judicial determination that someone needs church discipline, a member should not be excluded from the Table prematurely for sin they haven't yet committed and probably will not commit. Arguably, it is sin on the part of a church to exclude a baptized believer from the Table without a judicial reason, for that denies a member of His body access to His Table. Other than denying someone the opportunity to hear the word preached, I can't think of anything more offensive. Maybe we just don't really believe that the Lord's Supper really nourishes us. So exclude the kids; they're just missing a little juice and cracker, right? What's the worst that can happen? He could put you to sleep.

Is it an offense as serious as Jesus spoke about in Matthew 18? Could it cause them to stumble would be the key question? Does it teach them a wrong impression of the gospel? Does it deny them nourishment that God told us was an element for the strengthening of our faith and fellowship with Christ? Does it teach them to exclude people for not being "up to par" with a standard that really doesn't apply? You add up the effects, and they could produce something serious in a child's mind. It doesn't take that much to stumble; a small rock will do.

Here are the main questions that a Reformed church should ask itself with respect to giving communion to children of believing parents:

- Is it consistent to baptize infants into membership of the church, who have no knowledge of what God is accomplishing in their lives by that rite, then deny the Lord's Supper to those same children, now members of the church, because they have no, or merely insufficient, knowledge of what God is accomplishing in their lives by that rite?
- Does any adult understand completely what God is accomplishing through the mystery of Christ's presence when partaking of the body & the blood of Christ?

- Can a church judge a 3-year-old child's adequacy of faith in Christ based on an apologetic defense by that child before the Session and state categorically that such child is not a member of the elect?
- Can a church judge an adult's apologetic defense of their faith in Christ and state categorically that such person is without any doubt a member of the elect?
- Does the church want to contradict its ministers' sermons from the pulpit as to unmerited grace for all by teaching children they must be of a certain intellectual capacity in order to receive Christ in the Lord's Supper?
- Does the church really believe that God will sicken & kill children who take the Lord's Supper without adequately discerning the Lord's Body?
- In denying Communion's nourishment to its youngest & weakest members, the church denies that there is any necessary nourishment in Communion; therefore, is there any reason to continue to provide Communion as spiritual nourishment to any church member, child or adult, when the church's practice demonstrates that there is no nourishment in it?