

A Pastoral Letter on Children & The Sacraments

St. Paul's Presbyterian Church, Orlando Florida

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Dear Brothers and Sisters,

We love children at St. Paul's and count it a great joy and privilege to partner with parents in teaching children to trust and obey the Lord Jesus Christ. The Gospel writers remind us of how Jesus took children "in his arms" (Mark 13:16), and we want children to experience this loving embrace at St. Paul's. It is our prayer that every child in our midst would hear and experience the Savior's words of welcome, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 19:14).

The Bible is full of astonishing affirmations of how important children are to God and how strategically they fit within his grand plan of filling all things with his glory. Immediately after blessing our first parents in the beginning, God called Adam and Eve to "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" with children (Genesis 1:28). He not only created Adam and Eve in his image and likeness but called them to extend the boundaries of Eden "over all the earth" through their offspring (Genesis 1:26). Even after the Fall of humanity, God never gave up on this original plan. In fact, the biblical storyline revolves around an epic battle between the offspring of Eve and the evil one. In Genesis 3:15—which has often been called "the first Gospel"—God tells the snake who tempted Eve, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." (Genesis 3:15)

This freely promised gift of salvation through the offspring of the woman gradually unfolds throughout the biblical storyline and is ultimately fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ, “the last Adam” (1 Corinthians 15:45) who succeeds where the first Adam failed (1 John 3:8; Revelation 12:5).

In Genesis 3:15 we not only discover the biblical foundation of what Reformed theologians call “the covenant of grace” (*Westminster Larger Catechism*, 7.3), but also the principle that God’s promises are for us and our children (Acts 2:39). Indeed, it is remarkable that the very first promise recorded in Scripture (Genesis 3:15) focuses on a promised child!

Unfortunately, in much of our culture today, children—and especially unborn children—are not cherished. But in the Gospel, we discover the astonishing good news that God is so firmly committed to accomplishing his promised purposes through children that he became a child in the person of Jesus Christ. In the incarnation of his Son, God Almighty became an infant.

The specific purpose of this pastoral letter is to address some frequently asked questions about children and the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. We hope that it will be a helpful resource to parents as you seek to raise your children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

Q: Why do we baptize infants?

We baptize babies at St. Paul’s for the same reason that Abraham and his descendants circumcised their infants under the old covenant: the children of believers have always been included in God’s covenant promises (Genesis 3:15; 15:1-6; 17:1-27; Acts 2:39) and are called “holy” (1 Corinthians 7:14). In other words, they belong to God in a special way and are included among his people. Therefore, it would be wrong to withhold the covenant sign of baptism from the children of believers or to fail to distinguish them from the children of unbelievers (cf. Exodus 4:24-26). This was done under the old covenant by circumcision (Genesis 17:12) which was replaced under the new covenant by baptism (Colossians 2:11-12). The children of believers received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that comes by faith even before exercising personal faith under the old covenant (Genesis 17:12;

Romans 4:11). And so, our children should receive nothing less under the new covenant which is even greater than the old (Hebrews 8:6).

Q: Why don't infants receive the Lord's Supper?

We do not serve the Lord's Supper to infants at St. Paul's because they are not ordinarily able to follow the biblical requirements of self-examination and discernment that Paul identifies in 1 Corinthians 11:28-29. It is important to note that although there are many similarities between baptism and the Lord's Supper which have led some to conclude that the children of believers should receive the Lord's Supper as infants (like baptism), there are important differences between the two sacraments which help clarify why this is not the case (cf. *Westminster Larger Catechism* 177).

These differences between baptism and the Lord's Supper are also reflected in differences which existed under the old covenant between circumcision and Passover. Baptism replaces circumcision which God explicitly commanded Abraham to apply to his offspring while they were still infants (Genesis 17:12). But there is no command indicating that children were expected to eat the Passover meal which has been replaced by the Lord's Supper.

Baptism is a rite of *initiation*. But the Lord's Supper is a rite of *continuation*. In baptism, we *passively receive* the water (Matthew 28:19). But in the Lord's Supper we must *actively and consciously participate* in the meal lest we eat and drink judgment on ourselves (1 Corinthians 11:30). And this conscious participation—which includes remembering Christ's sacrifice on our behalf (1 Corinthians 11:22), examining ourselves (11:28), discerning the body (11:29) and eating the bread and wine—requires some level of physical maturity and spiritual discretion which infants and very young children do not typically possess.

Q: Are there any reasons why a child who professes faith should be kept from the Lord's Supper?

Yes. Considering Paul's warning in 1 Corinthians 11:27-31, children who lack a credible profession of faith or do not yet possess sufficient years of discretion to examine themselves and discern the body should be kept from the Lord's Supper (*Westminster Larger Catechism* Q. 173). To admit a child to the Lord's Supper before they are personally able to follow Paul's instructions

in 1 Corinthians 11 would not be honoring to Christ or loving to the child. It might even unintentionally “hinder them” (Matthew 19:14). “For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.” (1 Corinthians 11:29)

Q: What is a credible profession of faith?

A credible or “believable” profession of faith consists of at least two basic elements: (1) a personal understanding and affirmation of faith in Jesus Christ as he is freely offered to us in the Gospel and (2) a life marked by the fruit of repentance (cf. Mark 1:15).

The Gospel may be summarized as the good news that God reigns for us in Jesus Christ, who died for our sins and rose again to deliver us from sin and death and to bring us into his heavenly kingdom (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:1-5; Colossians 1:13). This free gift of salvation can only be received by grace through faith; it is not the result of works, so that no one should boast (Ephesians 2:8-9; cf. Luke 18:9-14).

Only God knows the heart. He alone can see for certain who truly believes and belongs to him. But Jesus taught his disciples to evaluate trees by their fruit (Matthew 7:15-20; Luke 6:43-45; John 15:8). We are saved by grace alone through faith alone (Ephesians 2:8-9), but the faith that saves is never alone (Ephesians 2:10; Galatians 5:6). It always produces fruit in keeping with repentance (cf. Matthew 3:8; Galatians 5:22-24; Ephesians 2:10; Titus 3:8). Therefore, a credible profession of faith will be marked by the fruit of repentance.

In applying these considerations to children who are preparing to come to the Lord’s Supper, there is wisdom in being patient. Like natural fruit, the spiritual fruit of repentance which springs from regeneration and faith takes time to grow. The root is there before the fruit is visible. Thus, although there may be an interval of time that goes by before the fruit of faith becomes evident, it would not be wise to admit children to the Lord’s Supper until the first buds and blossoms of that fruit can be seen.

Q: Do we deprive our children of a special grace when they are waiting to be admitted to the Lord’s Supper?

No, we do not deprive our children of a special grace when they are waiting to be admitted to the Lord's Supper because the different *means of grace* (e.g., the word, baptism, the Lord's Supper, prayer) deliver one and the same grace, that is, "the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Corinthians 13:14). To be sure, the church should not neglect to encourage children, on coming to years of discretion, to make a public confession of faith and to seek admission to the Lord's Supper as a precious means of grace (*Book of Church Order* 28-3). But while children are waiting and growing in maturity, it is important to recognize that all of God's grace is found in Jesus Christ alone. Although the grace of Christ is conveyed to us by a variety of different means—much like a garden may be nourished with the same water by a variety of different channels—these different means of grace deliver one and the same *Christ*.

It is also worth noting that covenant children who are not yet partaking of the communion elements at St. Paul's do nonetheless participate in our communal celebration of the Lord's Supper. They are not excluded from the sacramental life of the church, but participate very meaningfully by coming forward with their family, observing and listening, and being prayed for by the elders during our communion celebration. As we pray, we also recall and renew the covenant promises of their baptism. In this way our covenant children experience the grace of God (as members of their covenant family, and the covenant community), even as they look forward to participating more fully and personally as they mature physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Q: What does it mean to examine oneself in 1 Corinthians 11:28?

At the most basic level, to examine oneself is to test oneself to see if we really believe the Gospel and are living in light of its truth and power. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 13:5, "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves." Do we recognize our desperate need of God's grace in Jesus Christ? Are we resting in that grace alone for our salvation? Is the Gospel bearing fruit in our lives? Or does the character of our life contradict the confession of our lips? These are the types of question that we ought to ask ourselves as we come to the Lord's Supper.

In the original context of Paul's instructions about self-examination (1 Corinthians 11:28), the Corinthians' confession of faith was disgracefully

contradicted by the “divisions” that existed in their community (1 Corinthians 11:8). Thus, it is not only our relationship with God that we ought to examine as we prepare to participate in the Lord’s Supper, but we should also consider our relationships with one another (cf. Matthew 5:23-24).

Children who are preparing to come to the Lord’s Supper need to be taught that our relationship with God is closely related to our relationship with one another. What we do to other people we do to the image of God. As John says, “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen” (1 John 4:20).

Q: What does it mean to discern the body (1 Cor. 11:29)?

This question demands careful attention in light of Paul’s warning that “anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself” (1 Corinthians 11:29). In the immediate context of Paul’s warning in 1 Corinthians 11:29, the word “body” (*soma* in Greek) refers to the body of Christ represented in the broken bread used to celebrate the Lord’s Supper (1 Corinthians 11:23-24). Therefore, “discerning the body” requires those who partake of the bread to do so in remembrance of Christ’s sacrifice for our sins (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:16-17).

By way of extension, within the larger context of 1 Corinthians, “the body” also refers to the church (e.g., 1 Corinthians 12:12-13). Therefore, participants in the Lord’s Supper also must recognize the connection they share with other believers as members of Christ’s body. Paul rebuked the Corinthians for the disgraceful way they failed to do this when they came together as a church, because of the divisions that existed among them (1 Corinthians 11:17-22).

In summary, then, there are two aspects of “discerning the body” in 1 Corinthians 11:29. The first aspect is vertical, focusing on Christ’s sacrifice for our sin. The second aspect is horizontal focusing on the way Christ’s one sacrifice unites us with other believers within his one body.

Q: Does the Bible identify a specific age when children should be admitted to the Lord’s Supper?

No, the Bible does not specify an age when children should be admitted to the Lord’s Supper. Both Scripture and ordinary experience clearly indicate that

children go through a developmental process as they move from childhood to adulthood (Luke 2:52; John 9:21; 1 Corinthians 13:11). At some point in this process children reach what the *Westminster Larger Catechism* calls “years and ability to examine themselves” (WLC 177) and the *Book of Church Order* calls “years of discretion” (BCO 28-3). That specific age of discretion, however, is not identified in Scripture or our confessional standards, presumably because it is not the same for all children, some of whom develop more quickly than others.

Q: Whose responsibility is it to determine whether a child is ready to receive the Lord’s Supper?

This responsibility has been given to the elders of the church. It is our goal at St. Paul’s to partner with parents as they raise their children in a way that recognizes the distinct yet complementary authority and responsibility that God has invested in both the family and the church. On the one hand, God has clearly given parents unique authority and the primary responsibility for the Christian nurture and oversight of their children (Exodus 20:12; Colossians 3:20). However, this parental authority does not include the administration of the sacraments or the power of “the keys of the kingdom” (Matthew 16:19; cf. *The Book of Church Order* 12-5).

Q: How should parents respond to their child when he or she expresses a desire to participate in the Lord’s Supper?

Christian parents ought to affirm their children’s desire to participate in the Lord’s Supper as a good and healthy desire. But they should not encourage them to come to the Lord’s Supper prematurely. If parents believe their child is able to make a credible profession of faith, to examine himself or herself and discern the body (1 Corinthians 11:28-29), they should be encouraged to go through St. Paul’s communicants’ class and be interviewed by the elders for admission to the table. If parents have additional questions about this, they are encouraged to ask one of the pastors or elders.

Q: What kind of questions should parents expect the elders to ask their children before being admitted to the Lord’s Supper?

Parents should expect the elders to ask age-appropriate questions that are intended to clarify whether a child possesses personal faith in the Lord Jesus.

Do they demonstrate a genuine understanding and sorrow for their sin? Do they depend upon the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ alone for their salvation? Are they committed to submitting to the Lordship of Christ in every area of life? Are they able to discern the body? And are they prepared to keep their membership vows? In the interview, the elders will also review the five membership vows which are required to join PCA churches:

1. Do you acknowledge yourselves to be sinners in the sight of God, justly deserving His displeasure, and without hope save in His sovereign mercy?
2. Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and Savior of sinners, and do you receive and rest upon Him alone for salvation as He is offered in the Gospel?
3. Do you now resolve and promise, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, that you will endeavor to live as becomes the followers of Christ?
4. Do you promise to support the church in its worship and work to the best of your ability?
5. Do you submit yourselves to the government and discipline of the church, and promise to study its purity and peace?

Q: What is St. Paul's communicants' policy?

It is St. Paul's policy that candidates for communicant membership must go through a communicants' class and be interviewed by two elders before being admitted to the Lord's Supper. The communicants' class is designed for children who have completed the fifth grade. If the parents of younger children believe their child has the maturity of faith outlined in 1 Corinthians 11:17-32 and is able to work through the same material at home, they may do so in lieu of taking the class. In this case an elder will meet with them periodically as they work through the material with their parents to evaluate the child's ability to understand the gospel, examine themselves, discern the body, and take on the responsibilities of full church membership.

