

CHILDREN AND THE LORD'S SUPPER

WHY THIS PAPER?

The Lord's Supper is one of God's wonderful gifts to His people. On Jesus' last night with His disciples, He instituted the Supper as a holy meal to be celebrated regularly by His people between the time He ascended into Heaven 2000 years ago and His return at the end of time.

Given the importance of this worship event, we want families to have a better understanding of its remarkable significance. Only then can you understand why we wait for children to reach a certain age and point of maturity before we feel they are able to participate in a worthy manner.

WHY DID JESUS INSTITUTE A MEAL LIKE THIS?

We are intensely physical people. We access everything in life through our physical senses. How then do intensely physical people engage a God who transcends the senses? How can we, who have such a weak capacity for belief and trust in God to begin with, be encouraged to follow a God we cannot see, hear, taste, smell or touch?

The Lord's Supper is a key way in which Christ addresses this difficulty. Through the Supper, the Spirit of God engages us as we partake of physical food. We are given the opportunity to experience, with all five senses, the emblems which represent to us the broken body and shed blood of Christ.

WHAT HAPPENS DURING THE LORD'S SUPPER?

Over the centuries, there has been much debate over what actually happens during the Lord's Supper. On one end of the continuum, the Catholic Church teaches that the bread and wine of the Lord's Table are actually transformed into the physical body and blood of Christ. On the other end of the continuum, many evangelical churches teach that the Lord's Supper is merely a symbolic commemoration of what Jesus accomplished for us on the Cross and nothing more.

Here at Second Presbyterian Church we believe that the Lord's Supper provides a spiritual encounter with God in between these two extremes. It is a sign and seal of God's covenant of grace with His people. On the one hand, it is a symbolic commemoration, a sign which represents that:

- the great work of Christ on the Cross freed us once and for all time from God's wrath against sin (1 Cor. 11:26);
- Christ saves a whole people, not just individuals, and that we are united in the one body of Christ (1 Cor. 10:16-17);
- our hope for salvation and growth in grace, with all of the benefits of the new covenant, is anchored in no other place but in the death of our Savior (Jn. 6:53).

On the other hand, we believe that the Lord's Supper is much more than a visible sign of invisible realities. It is also a seal of these realities. When we speak of a seal, we speak of something that in fact confirms and communicates what is being signified.

For example, a husband may regularly tell his wife that he loves her. When he kisses her, the kiss is a sign of his love. However, his kiss is more than a symbol; it is also a seal of that love. That is to say, it confirms to her the reality of his love, and it communicates the very love it symbolizes.

In a similar way, the Lord's Supper is a seal of God's grace towards us. It confirms that we who receive it by faith are in fact recipients of that grace. It also communicates the very grace it symbolizes. Just as a kiss is a special expression of a husband's love for his wife, the Lord's Supper is a special expression of the love and saving grace which God has lavished on His people.

We also affirm that Christ is truly present with His people as we partake of the bread and wine (1 Cor. 10:16,20-22).

He is the host of the Lord's Table (1 Cor. 10:21). At the Table He communicates to us both the benefits of His death and the power of His life (Jn. 6:51-63).

Thus, while we do not believe that the bread and wine literally become the body and blood of Christ, we do encounter the risen Christ by means of the Holy Spirit as we partake of the bread and wine by faith. This is one reason why the Supper is also called Communion.

PARTAKING IN A WORTHY MANNER

Given all that happens during the Supper and all that Christ gives to us during it, the Scripture solemnly warns us, under threat of judgment, against partaking of the Supper "in an unworthy manner" (1 Cor. 11:27).

What then does it mean to partake of this meal in a worthy manner?

Historically there has been much confusion on this point. On the one hand, countless Christians have been unduly afraid of the Lord's Supper, believing they must first "get their lives together"—an impossible task for us sinners—before they are worthy to partake of the Supper. Tragically, many life-long believers have died without ever sitting at the Lord's Table, not even once!

At its most fundamental level, the Lord's Supper is precisely for those who cannot get their lives together. We partake of the Supper as an expression of our need for a forgiveness that was bought by Christ's crucified body and shed blood, as represented by the elements we consume. Thus, paradoxically, one huge key to partaking of the Supper in a *worthy* manner is to acknowledge our *unworthiness* of it.

On the other hand, partaking of the Lord's Supper is a dangerous event for the presumptuous and proud. Those who deem themselves sufficiently righteous and worthy of the Lord's Table are partaking in an unworthy manner.

In addition, haughtiness towards other believers disqualifies us from participation at the Table, as the Corinthian church learned. Because they treated rich Christians more favorably than poor Christians, God struck the offenders with both illness and death (1 Cor. 11:30).

Thus, the Lord's Supper is a saving experience for the humble of heart, but it is a condemning experience for the proud of heart.

PREPARATION FOR THE TABLE

Because participation at the Lord's Table can be either a means of grace or a means of condemnation, depending upon how one participates, the Bible encourages us to prepare for the table by examining ourselves (1 Cor. 11:28). The purpose of the examination is not to find enough righteousness in ourselves to make us worthy. Rather, the purpose of the examination is:

- to confess and repent of all known sins in thought, word and deed;
- to acknowledge again that we cannot save ourselves from God's wrath against sin;
- to acknowledge that our only hope for salvation is in Jesus Christ, who suffered the full measure of God's wrath in place of sinners like us;
- to forsake all alternative paths to salvation and re-embrace Christ alone as our Savior;
- to rededicate ourselves to living lives befitting our membership in Christ's Covenant Community;
- to acknowledge God's saving love for one, unified people by being reconciled to and honoring all other members of Christ's covenant people.

THE LORD'S TABLE AND CHILDREN

Given what the Lord's Table represents and what God requires of us as we approach it, the Presbyterian Church historically has not encouraged children under twelve years of age to participate in the Supper.

Instead, we wait with great hope and expectancy for them to complete the Youth Inquirers class, profess their faith publicly, and assume the full covenant obligations of communicant membership. Then we joyfully invite and even urge them to join us at the Lord's Table and enjoy its glory and solemnity.

If you have any questions concerning these principles as they apply to your children, we invite you to speak with our Children's Ministry Department.

CONCLUSION

The Lord's Supper is one of the tender ways in which God looks to strengthen and nourish our feeble faith. He knows our hearts are quick to doubt the goodness and truth of the Gospel. He knows that our faith is always a mixture of belief and unbelief. Thankfully, he gives us something we can see, hear, taste, smell and touch as a pledge of His saving love and faithfulness to us.

The message of the Lord's Table is the same as the message of the Bible: God saves sinners through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Robert Bruce, a Scottish minister during the 16th Century said, "The Word leads us to Christ by the ear:

the Sacraments lead us to Christ by the eye and by the mouth and by the hand. But it is to the same Christ we are led. We do not get a better Christ in the Sacrament. But we may get Christ better by taking it.” Jesus Christ has been given to us in both Word and Sacrament. Let us join the feast!

A WORD FROM THE DIRECTOR TO PARENTS

I know that there are many children who have professed to know Christ... the fruit is evident in their lives. The position taken in this booklet – that children under 12 not take communion – is not meant to negate this profession. I hope that you will use your children’s eagerness for admission to the table to encourage them in their walk, to provide guidance and wisdom and to build the anticipation for the time when they do join the church through the Inquirers Class and come to the table for the great celebration.

Encouragement in their walk with the Lord comes through regular Bible reading and family worship times. Use mealtimes as an opportunity to talk with your children about the evidences of Christ working in their lives daily. Look for projects that the family can do to reach out to others: feeding the homeless, taking food and clothing to those in need, visiting nursing homes, reading and tutoring at the Neighborhood School or Neighborhood Christian Center, taking part in the annual CityServe Day of Service from our church and praying for and reaching out to others.

Before communion, talk with your children about the significance and importance of the sacraments. Then during communion reach over, touch your children and pray with and for them. They can be included in communion without actually partaking. At those times when we go forward for communion, let your children go with you so they can receive the blessing and prayer from the minister and elder. In this way communion is not just an individual act, but it is more clearly a family time.

We Christian parents need to help our children anticipate the joys of participating in the Lord’s Supper.

I hope that this information will be helpful to you in understanding the origin and nature of the Lord’s Supper and explaining the stance that our Session has taken regarding children receiving communion.

For additional readings or books contact the Children’s Ministry Office.

In His Joy,



Sandy Hazelwood

Director of Children’s Ministries