

**Report 1**

# Children at Lord's Supper

## **Standing Committee Report to CRCA Synod 2021**

Committee Membership:

Rev David Lynch

Rev Ben Murphy

Rev Adam Schoenmaker

Rev Dr Martin Williams (Advisor)

### **Committee Mandate:**

1. To appoint a committee to consider the following:
  - a. Review the theological and exegetical studies in regard to 'Children at Lord's Supper' as brought to previous CRCA Synods 1994, 1997, 2000.
  - b. Consult with the Churches in Ecclesiastical Fellowship with the CRCA to ascertain:
    - i. What can be learned from the CEF churches in regard to children at Lord's Supper.
    - ii. What the implications would be of the CEF relation with particular churches if the CRCA moved toward having children attend the Lord's Supper.
  - c. Ascertain whether adopting children's participation in Lord's Supper is a confessional matter requiring a gravamen.
  - d. To clarify whether children participating at the Lord's Supper is based on being covenant members of the church or whether the children need to demonstrate an age-and-ability understanding of the grace of God proclaimed in the Supper or a public profession of faith.
  - e. To clarify what is meant by the words 'covenant relationship', whether such refers to 'being a member of the church' or 'being in relationship with Christ', or both.
  - f. To clarify what Baptism and the Lord's Supper both actually signify with respect to covenant children.
  - g. To clarify what the relationship is between Baptism and Lord's Supper in relation to children.
  - h. To clarify the practical implications for how elders and parents would work alongside each other to provide encouragement, instruction and accountability for the children to participate in the Lord's Supper.
2. That Synod instruct the committee to interact with sessions during the Inter-Synodical period on the above issues both to get feedback from the churches and to provide information to the churches on the ongoing work of the committee.
3. That after consultation with the churches a decision on whether children should attend the Lord's Supper be taken at Synod 2021.

Esteemed brothers,

We respectfully submit our report to Synod under the following headings:

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## **1. A History of the Discussion in the CRCA**

### **1.1 Overview of History**

The history of discussion on this topic in the CRCA is extensive and circuitous. Synod 1985 received an overture to investigate the question of child participation in the Lord's Supper. A study committee submitted a report to the 1988 Synod with the recommendation that the historic approach be maintained, which restricted participation in the Lord's Supper to those who have professed their faith. Synod also recommended that covenant youth be encouraged to profess their faith at a younger age, but restricted full voting rights to those 18 years and older.

These recommendations caused difficulties in the churches with regard to defining "a younger age", and questions arose with regard to the privileges and status of child/baptised membership in the church. Synod 1991 formed a committee to review these issues.

The committee submitted a report to Synod 1994 with recommendations that opened the Lord's Supper to covenant children, with a public profession of faith being required to teach, hold office, and to vote. Synod 1994 was not satisfied that certain areas of the subject had been adequately covered by the report, which led to another committee being given the mandate to review the subject once again. A truncated report was submitted to Synod 1997 due to the personal circumstances of those in the committee. As a result, Synod 1997 recommissioned the committee with the original 1994 mandate.

The report from this committee was tabled at Synod in 2000. While the committee had some hesitations, it again recommended that the Lord's Supper be opened up to covenant children who are old enough to benefit from the teaching of the Supper. For reasons not captured by the minutes, Synod 2000 chose to reject the core recommendation of the committee and maintain a public profession of faith as a prerequisite for participation in the Supper. Synod did, however, encourage profession of faith at a younger age. Synod 2000 commissioned a study committee to look at the second question of the form and how it applies to younger children.

### **1.2 Overview of Recommendations**

1988 – Recommendation 3.1.

*There are no Scriptural grounds to abandon the Reformational practice of requiring a profession of faith by all who seek to take part in the sacramental means of grace of the Lord's Supper, be they baptised children of the Church or new converts.*

1994 – Recommendation 2.5.

*That there are no Scriptural grounds to continue the Reformational practice of requiring a profession of faith by baptised members of the covenant community before seeking to take part in the Lord's Supper.*

1997 – No direct recommendations due to the incomplete nature of the report.

2000 – Recommendation 2.3

*That admission to the Lord’s Supper should be on the basis of covenant membership (as with baptism), and is available to the covenant child at an age when a child can benefit from the teaching the supper brings. This can be demonstrated when there is genuine inquiry from the child e.g., “What does this mean for you?”.*

### **1.3 Assessment**

From this brief overview it is clear that this is an issue on which the church has not found exegetical unity. It would appear that the heart of the issue lies in trying to articulate what exactly it means that we confess children are members of the covenant and what the implications of that are for the Lord’s Supper. The fact that three committees have clearly affirmed this theological understanding and yet come to different conclusions, and the fact that two study committees brought recommendations for change that were rejected by Synod show that there is not clarity or consensus about what it actually means when we confess children of believers belong to the covenant.

## **2. Consultation with Churches in Ecclesiastical Fellowship (CEF)**

### **2.1 What can be learned from CEF churches?**

#### Presbyterian Church of Australia (PCA)

The PCA mandated a committee to address the issue of children at Lord’s Supper in 2016. The recommendations of the ensuing report, which were adopted almost unanimously, preserve the necessity of faith to partake worthily (Recommendations 1, 2), while allowing Sessions to determine, in consultation with parents, that children have made a credible profession of faith, although not necessarily a *public* profession of faith (Recommendations 3, 4, 5, 6, 7).

#### Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC)

In 1988 the General Assembly of the OPC received a [report](#) from the committee on paedocommunion which argued both for and against the position. The recommendations eventually adopted by the Assembly (drafted by the Advisory Committee) prescribed *“faith that confesses, discerns, remembers, and proclaims the body of Christ”* as the basis of participation rather than age (Recommendation 1), while also encouraging sessions to be *“more faithful in oversight”*, particularly regarding covenant children (Recommendation 2).

#### United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA)

The URCNA addressed the doctrine and practice of paedocommunion at Synod in 2004. Synod concluded, *“The confessions to which the URCNA subscribe (the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, the Canons of Dort) accurately summarize the teaching of scripture in, for example, 1 Cor 11.24–25; 28. Thus our confessions, in harmony with the scripture, require that the Lord’s Supper be administered only to those who have publicly professed their faith, in the presence of God and His holy church.”*

#### Reformed Church of New Zealand (RCNZ)

The RCNZ has not done any committee work on the issue of children at Lord’s Supper.

The position of the RCNZ, similar to the current position of the CRCA, is that admission to the Lord's Supper is on the basis of a public profession of faith.

#### Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia (PCEA)

The PCEA has not done any committee work on the issue of children at Lord's Supper. They hold a similar view to the CRCA, except that public profession of faith is performed not before the congregation but before Session.

#### Reformed Presbyterian Church (RPC)

The RPC wrote a paper for our committee stating their position as: *"We would respectfully counsel the CRCA that we are not persuaded that Scripture warrants the admission of covenant children to the Lord's Table simply on the basis of their status as covenant children, but teaches that the privilege of communing at the Lord's table is a privilege reserved for those who reach the level of maturity at which they can "discern the Lord's body." This is also the stage at which they can make a considered and credible profession of saving faith and come into the privileges of full membership of the Church."*

### **2.2 What would be the implications for our CEF relationships?**

If the CRCA were to adopt the position that admission to the Lord's Supper was on the basis of baptism alone, this would likely be problematic for many, if not all, our CEF relationships.

For example, when the CRCA was considering similar issues regarding children at Lord's Supper and membership in the early 2000's, the response of the RCNZ was as follows:

*RCNZ Synod 2002: "To advise the CRCA that our sister-church relationship is again under strain because of the decision on Women as Deacons, Children at the Lord's Supper, and continued acceptance of worship innovations which are a departure from traditional Reformed practice."*

*RCNZ Synod 200: "To express appreciation for the decision of CRCA Synod 2003 regarding "children and church membership"."*

However, if the CRCA were to adopt a position that preserved the necessity of faith for proper participation and yet allowed for the inclusion of children who make a credible profession of faith (under the supervision of Session and in consultation with parents), this would most likely not be seen as problematic for our CEF relationships.

### **3. Examination of the Confessions**

The committee undertook a study of the confessions to ascertain what limitations they impose around who may participate in the Lord's Supper. Our findings can be summarised by the following bullet points.

A person may participate in the Lord's Supper if:

- They are regenerate
- They have undergone new birth effected by the word of the gospel

- They can receive the Lord's Supper in the Spirit by faith
- They are a believer
- They have a faith that they can confess through the Lord's Supper
- They are able to examine themselves prior to taking the Lord's Supper
- They can be assured by the Lord's Supper that they are a Christian
- They can understand the declaration that the Lord's Supper makes that they are forgiven by Jesus' work on the cross and are part of his body
- They are displeased with themselves because of their sin, trust that they are pardoned, and desire to be strengthened in their faith and godliness.

It is noteworthy that there is an absence of any age restriction, and the public ceremony we refer to as a *public profession of faith* is not a confessional pre-requisite.

With the above in mind the committee drew the following conclusions:

- We could remove an age limit for participation in the Lord's Supper without coming into conflict with the confessions.
- We could remove a ceremonial 'public profession of faith' as a pre-requisite for participation in the Lord's Supper without coming into conflict with the confessions. Children would, of course, need to profess faith in Jesus, but this need not take the shape of the ritual we conduct in our churches when children enter their teenage years or as adults.
- If we were to allow infants to participate in the Lord's Supper we would come into conflict with the confessions and this would require a gravamen. Note: the issue here is not so much about age but rather a child's development. Any child participating in the Lord's Supper must be able to meaningfully meet the confessional requirements spelt out in the above bullet points, otherwise a gravamen would be necessary.

#### **4. Exegetical Study: Covenant, Children and the Lord's Supper**

The discussion at Synod 2018 and the ensuing mandate for this committee revealed there was a lack of clarity around what it means for us to confess that children of believers belong to the covenant and what their belonging means for their participation in the life of the church. In order to address these concerns and those outlined in the mandate, it will first be necessary to look at the nature of the covenant and what we mean when we refer to the children of believers, and by extension, the church, as God's covenant people.

##### **4.1 Covenant in the Old Testament**

###### **4.1.1 The Nature of the Covenant**

Fundamental to a Reformed understanding of the unity of God's plan of salvation, and consequently the unity of Scripture, is the idea that when humanity fell into sin in Genesis 3 God put into place a plan of salvation that had been conceived within the Trinity before the creation of the world. This plan was announced in seed form in Genesis 3:15 in the *protevangelium*, where God first promised that through the seed of the woman he would crush the head of Satan. This promise would ultimately culminate in the reconciliation of humanity to its Creator and the restoration of the creation itself. Reformed theology has always placed great emphasis on the gracious nature of God's actions in redemption and consequently described this overarching plan as the *Covenant of Grace*.

As redemptive history unfolds, we learn that within the overarching promise made in Genesis 3 there were a number of intermediate stages, or covenants, through which God steadily unveiled his plan of redemption, culminating in the coming of the Christ.

In contrast to Dispensational theology, which draws a hard line between each movement of redemptive history, and Baptist theology, which tends to isolate the new covenant from everything that comes before it, Reformed theology maintains the unity of redemptive history and describes the different stages of redemptive history as different administrations of the *same* overarching covenant.

In assessing these different administrations and what we learn about the nature of the covenant of grace from them, we will focus primarily on the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants. The Noahic covenant, with its promise that there would never again be such a flood that would destroy nearly all life on the earth, guarantees a secure stage on which the story of redemption could be worked out. The Davidic covenant focuses on the promise of a king from the line of David, as God promised, but one much better than David (2 Sam 7:8-16). The Abrahamic and the Mosaic covenants demonstrate most fully the nature and extent of the covenant promise.

In Genesis 12 God calls Abraham and his family and gives them the threefold promise of people, blessing, and place. This promise is then ratified in the covenant cutting ceremony of Genesis 15 before being further reaffirmed in Genesis 17 in the giving of the covenant sign – circumcision.

God makes clear in Genesis 17 that the covenant made with Abraham embraces not only Abraham but also his descendants after him (how his descendants are "in the covenant" is a question we will return to later).

Fundamental to the Abrahamic covenant is the fact that it is unilaterally established, that is, initiated by God. The stress in Genesis 12:1-3 is on the action of God: "*Go ... to the land that I will show you. ... I will make of you a great nation ... I will bless you and make your name great ... I will bless those who bless you ... him who dishonors you I will curse.*" In it, God both promises the blessings of the covenant, and guarantees the fulfilment of the promises. This is the significance of only one party, God, moving between the cut animals in the 'cutting' ceremony of Genesis 15. It was a gracious covenant through and through.

Of course, this does not mean that no response is required from Abraham as God's covenant partner. When God gives the promises to Abraham he expects that Abraham will trust that God will do what he says. It is significant that a declaration of Abraham's faith is given in Genesis 15:6 prior to the ratifying of the covenant. God further elaborates

on the nature of the covenant as both of grace but requiring a trusting (Gen 15:6) and obedient (Gen 17:1) response. God declares in Genesis 18:18-19,

*“Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.”*

To summarise, in the Abrahamic covenant God establishes that redemptive history will be focused on the line of Abraham. He gives to Abraham the sign of circumcision as a sign and seal of the covenant God made to him and of the promises and obligations contained in that covenant (Gen 17:11).

As redemptive history unfolds, further covenants explain the nature of covenant obligation. However, covenant obligation never comes outside of a context of grace. The Mosaic covenant is expressly described as a fulfilment of God's unilateral promise given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Ex 2:23-25, 3:16-17) and is given at Sinai in the context of Israel's redemption from Egypt (Ex 20:1-2).

Both the Passover and the introduction to the law (Ex 19:5-6, Ex 20:1) reinforce the context of grace in which covenant obligation is to be lived and thankful obedience expected.

Through the Mosaic covenant God expounds in greater detail the nature of covenant obedience, as well as the blessing and cursing that will accompany Israel's obedience and disobedience. God also established the sacrificial system, which declared his forgiveness of sins (Ex 20:22-26). It also contained a legal system to govern the nation of Israel, and a moral law that defined sin and declared what was pleasing to him (Ex 20:1-17; Deut. 5:1-21). The law was a means of administering the covenant community until Christ came (Gal 3:19-21)

In all of this, the children of Israel were treated as covenant insiders; as both heirs to God's promises and as such, expected to respond with covenant obedience. Circumcision marked Abraham's descendants as standing in covenant relationship with Yahweh.

*“I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you !” (Gen 17:7).*

This reality brought with it incredible blessing. Covenant children grew up knowing the true God, participating in Israel's religious celebrations in which they celebrated God's gracious saving acts, and were recipients of God's law, which was given to be a blessing (Deut. 4:5-8).

However, covenant membership also brought with it the responsibility to respond with covenantal faithfulness to God's grace. Covenant children were called to faith and obedience. Circumcision was given by grace to covenant children and symbolised God's gracious covenant with them, but it was never intended to be viewed as a guarantee of spiritual blessing or a reason for presumption. This is what John the Baptists criticises Israel for in Luke 3:8 when he warns,

*Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up*

*children for Abraham.*

Moses made clear that the external sign of circumcision was to be accompanied by internal circumcision (a heart renewed by grace), faith, and repentance when he says in Deuteronomy 10:16, *“Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer”*. Paul also reflects this understanding of circumcision in Romans 2:25-29 when he contrasts internal circumcision of the heart and with external circumcision of the flesh.

This means, Israelite children were members of the covenant by nature of their connection with God's covenant people, but they were called to respond to the privileges of covenant membership with faith like their father Abraham. The external sign was to show them that they were part of the covenant people, that they belonged to the one true God, and that they were required to trust and obey him.

The history of Israel shows that within Israel, externally marked as God's people through circumcision, there were those who were saved (through heart circumcision) and responded to his grace with faith and loving obedience, and there were those that didn't. For example, in 1 Kings 19:10 Elijah complained to God of Israel's unfaithfulness, to which God responded by saying,

*“Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel – all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him.”*

This verse reveals that there was a God ordained division within the covenant people of Israel: the elect and the non-elect. The apostle Paul refers to this division in Romans 9 when he discusses Israel's response to the coming of the Messiah. In Romans 9:1-4 he outlines the covenantal privileges of Israel showing that God had been faithful and his word had not failed, but then he says,

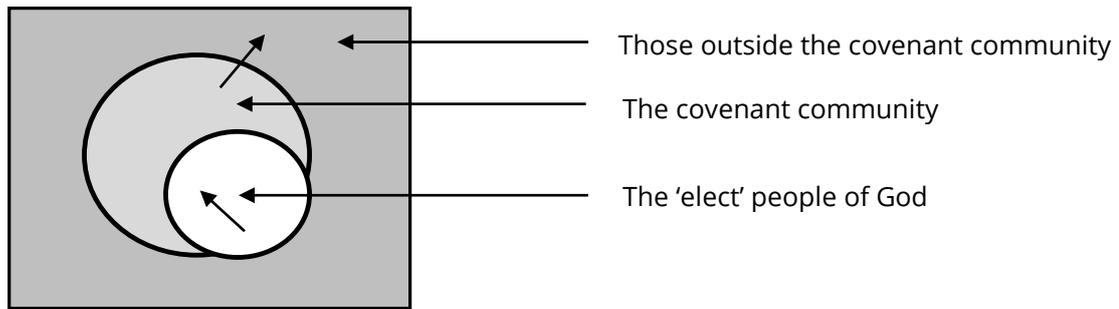
*“For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children.”*

This would seem to suggest that in the Old Testament the covenant of grace contained two types of people; one marked by external circumcision, land and temple, and one that is hidden from the eyes of man and is marked by election and internal circumcision of the heart manifested through faith. The two are closely related, and the external expresses the internal.

The covenant brought with it God's blessing and the call to covenant obedience, but not by itself eschatological salvation. Eschatological salvation was a product of belonging to the elect people of God, and was governed by God's decree.

The decreetally elect were generally, but not limited to being a subset of the covenant. We get hints that God's election to eschatological life extended beyond national Israel when we see that Gentiles also came to faith and joined God's covenant people. (e.g. Melchizedek, Rahab, Ruth, Naaman).

This relationship between the covenant and election can be visualised like this:



### **4.1.2 The Sacraments and the Covenant in the Old Testament**

Having established the nature of the Covenant of Grace in the Old Testament as comprising both the elect and the non-elect, we can now ask how the sacraments of the Old Testament related to these two aspects.

As we have already seen, circumcision was a command given by God to Abraham as a sign of God's promise that he would be the God of Abraham and his descendants and that they would be his people (Gen 17:3-14). Circumcision was both an external marker of God's covenant people, as well as a reminder of the call to covenant faithfulness. It symbolised the faithfulness and graciousness of God's promise, the blessing of covenant membership, and union between God and his people, but did not assure covenant faithfulness nor did it guarantee eschatological salvation. Rather, circumcision pointed Israel's Children to the one covenant God who alone could save them.

External circumcision, then, needed to be accompanied by internal circumcision of the heart, or as Paul would later put it, "the circumcision of Christ" (Col 2:11), and manifested in saving faith, which reveals the person as a true heir of Abraham.

*"Consider Abraham: "He believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness". Understand then that those who believe are children of Abraham ... so those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith" (Gal 3:6-7,9)*

Circumcision, then, marked a person as belonging to the covenant people of God. There were not two levels, or types, of membership in the people of Israel, for the elect were known only to God. Israel as a whole was declared to be holy by virtue of their relationship to God as his covenant people, rather than their behaviour. In fact, their status as God's covenant people was the basis for the call to covenant obedience (Ex 19:4-6; 20:1). This covenantal holiness is the qualification for participation in the worship life of the covenant people (Ex 12:48).

This truth is played out when we come to the other sacraments of the Old Testament: the Passover and other festivals of Israel. There we find that everyone within the covenant community is commanded to participate in the covenant festivals and celebrations of Israel (Lev 23:1-43, Deut. 12:1-7).

While God makes it clear that Israel are to 'cut off' anyone who sins grossly or attempts to lead others into worshipping idols (Deut. 13:1-18), there is no attempt to filter out the 'internal' Israel from the 'external' Israel. The only qualification was that the worshiper

should be ceremonially clean, but this is clearly not a moral or spiritual category.<sup>1</sup>

With regard to the Passover, it is clear that in the original celebration, before it was centralised to the temple, covenant children also participated to some degree (Ex 12:24-28).<sup>2</sup> This appears true of the other sacrifices, offerings, and festivals from passages such as Deuteronomy 12:7,12 where families are commanded to be present, and 1 Samuel 1:4 where Elkanah's wife and children share in the fellowship meal at the tabernacle.

However, this observation needs to be balanced with the recognition that in other passages the Old Testament seems to particularly specify that it's male adults who were to attend festivals, including the Passover (Deut. 16:16-17), although the broader passage seems to assume the presence of families (Deut. 16:11-14).

It is important to note, however, that while there are indications that children participated in the festivals and feasts of the Old Testament, the evidence we have demonstrates that they were active rather than passive participants. In Exodus 12:26-27 it is assumed that the children are old enough to ask questions, and in Deuteronomy 16:11 they are envisioned as being old enough to "rejoice before the Lord".

In conclusion, the sacraments were related to marking out and celebrating God's grace as represented by the covenant between God and Israel; for adults as well as children. The fact that there was within Israel a number known only to God who were elect and therefore were truly Israel (cf. Rom 9:6) doesn't factor in how the sacraments and sacrifices of Israel were celebrated in the Old Testament. Admission was on the basis of covenant membership alone, although in the case of the Passover and other festivals there is an assumption that they will be active participation.

## **4.2 Covenant in the New Testament**

### **4.2.1 The Nature of the Covenant**

We now need to ask whether there is a different covenantal arrangement when we move from the Old Testament into the New Testament. Does God's framework for dealing with humanity as a whole, and his people specifically, change, and if so, how?

Generally speaking, Baptist theology has traditionally held that with the coming of Christ and the inauguration of the new covenant, the categories of the Old Testament have fallen away. Circumcision and the Passover related to the Old Covenant with its external regulations and its identification of the covenant people with ethnic Israel. The New Covenant, they argue, is no longer an external covenant, but strictly an internal one. Therefore, the sacraments are only appropriately celebrated by those who are members

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<sup>1</sup> While ceremonial cleanness or uncleanness did not represent a moral or spiritual division within Israel, it was meant to reinforce to Israel the holiness of God and the need for humanity to be right before they could come before him.

<sup>2</sup> The actual role of children in the Passover is a point that has been debated at great length without any clear resolution, as evidenced by the CRCA Synod 2000 report. Those who argue for children at the Lord's Supper will see clear evidence of covenant children participating in the Passover, including consuming; whereas those who don't think children should be at the Lord's Supper will read the evidence in a different way. The second group will also often see a greater disconnect between the Passover and the Lord's Supper. What seems clear from Exodus is that children were certainly present at the Passover meal and parents were encouraged to include their children and make the Passover not just a celebration of redemption, but a teaching time as well.

of that internal covenant; that is, those who have made a confession of faith in Christ and who have given sufficient evidence of regeneration.

Generally speaking, for the Baptist, the covenant relationship between one generation and another has been effectively severed in the New Covenant. Each generation relates to God on the basis of its own profession and according to its own faith, irrespective of the faith of the previous generation.

On the other hand, Reformed theology has historically held to a much stronger unity between the testaments, and therefore between the way God works in the Old and the New. The New Covenant is not understood as replacing the Old Testament covenants but as fulfilling and building upon them. Each covenant throughout redemptive history represents a different stage, or administration, in the outworking of the one overarching covenant of grace, initiated in time as God's response to humanity's rebellion and fall into sin.

The question is whether the NT continues to reflect a distinction between an external covenant community and an invisible, elect group, who will ultimately be saved.

#### **4.2.2 The Nature of the Covenant in Jesus' Teaching**

We have already examined John the Baptist's warning to the Israelite crowds coming out to be baptised that they were not to presume on their covenantal heritage (Luke 3:7-9). John's challenge is not to presume on having a covenantal connection to Abraham, but to respond to their covenant membership with repentance and faithful obedience (3:8, 10-14).

Jesus' ministry is characterised by a similar challenge to ethnic Israel to respond to the covenant promise with faith, repentance, and obedience (cf. Mark 11:12-25; John 15:1-17); a challenge he particularly directed towards the leadership. Many of Jesus' parables are aimed at Israel as God's chosen people, but who were at risk of missing out on salvation because of their rejection of God's Messiah. In the parables of the Unmerciful Servant (Matt 18:22-35), the Tenants (Matt 21:33-46) and the Wedding Banquet (Matt 22:1-14), Jesus assumes, or explicitly teaches, the covenantal privilege of Israel, but concludes that that privilege and blessing does not guarantee their salvation (cf. Mark 11:17-19).

Salvation according to Jesus in Matthew 11:20-30 and John 6:35-40 is according to the sovereign decree of God (although in these passages and elsewhere, he holds this truth in tension with humanity's responsibility to respond to the gospel call).

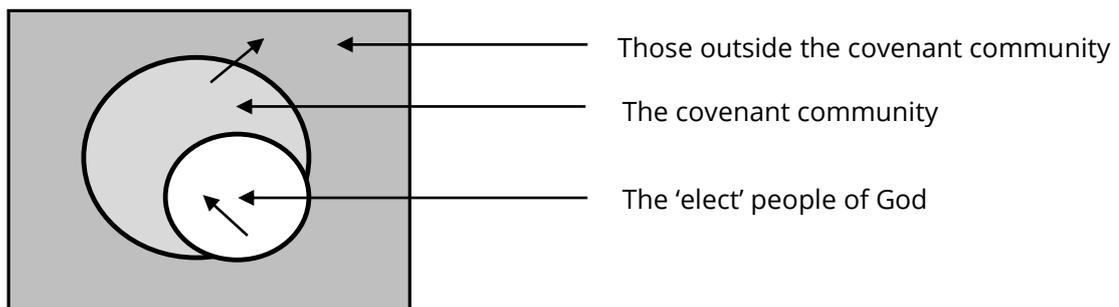
This distinction between the invisible decree and an external covenant is brought out most clearly in the teaching of Jesus in his metaphor of the vine and the branches in John 15. In this metaphor he sheds light on how we might understand the nature of the new covenant moving forward.<sup>3</sup> Picking up the imagery of Israel as God's vine (Psalm 80, Isaiah 5), Jesus identifies himself as the "true vine", the one in whom Israel finds its fulfilment. Where Israel failed, he succeeded. Where Israel proved to be a disobedient son, he was an obedient Son. Where Israel was unfaithful as God's chosen servant and his "first-born

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<sup>3</sup> I draw here from the work of Glenn N. Davies in his unpublished class notes, *The Relationship Between Covenant and Election*.

son” (cf. Ex 4:22, Hos 11:1-4), Jesus was faithful (cf. Matt 3:13-4:11). Jesus is the root and trunk of the “new covenant” vine, and by extension all those who are united to him as “branches” are members of the new covenant plant.

However, as Jesus’ teaching makes clear, membership in this vine is not a decretal membership for some of the branches prove “unfruitful” and so are cut off. They are members of the covenant community (in the same way as Judas Iscariot) who nevertheless do not abide in Jesus, and so are removed (15:2, 6; cf. John 6:70-71: “Jesus answered them, ‘Did I not choose you, the twelve? And yet one of you is a devil.’ He spoke of Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, *one of the twelve*, was going to betray him”). For these members Jesus warns that their end will be destruction (John 15:6).



Of course, Jesus is not denying decretal election. In many places he firmly upholds the idea that God has chosen those who will ultimately be saved and who will never be lost (e.g., John 6:37-38, 10:25-30, 17:6-19).

The warnings that he gives in his parables and metaphors are calls to covenantal obedience. No one can presume on the covenant promise. Membership in the covenant people, the true vine, is a call to trust and obedience. Jesus taught this with particular reference to Israel, yet it is an important context for understanding the church, those among the Gentiles who will be grafted into the vine and become, together with Israel, the New Testament covenant community. (cf. Rom 11:11-24).

We can conclude, then, that we see a similar dynamic in Jesus’ teaching to that which we see in the Old Testament. Under the covenant of grace not all those who are part of the “outward” covenant community necessarily belong to the “elect”. Outward participation in the vine requires an inward response of faith, which is a work of God through his Spirit (Eph 2:8-10). Despite this unseen separation, everyone is called to covenantal faithfulness and obedience. Jesus constantly holds God’s sovereignty in election and humanity’s responsibility to respond in faith, in a dynamic tension.

### **4.2.3 The Nature of the Covenant and the Church**

We must now ask whether we see this same scheme as we move into the time of the New Testament church. While initially the church remained a largely Jewish entity, the locus of this covenant community now becomes the person and work of Jesus (cf. John 15). Blood descent from Abraham is replaced by union with Jesus, the Messiah, as the marker of covenantal membership in the people of God.

On the day of Pentecost, Peter stood before the crowd and declared the disobedience of

Israel on the one hand and the promise of the gospel on the other. To those who will come to Jesus in repentance he promised the forgiveness of sins and filling with the presence of God through his Holy Spirit. As Peter declared the gospel, he took up the language of the Abrahamic covenant declaring in Acts 2:39, *"This promise is for you and your children"*, but adding the new element that it is also, *"for all who are far off"*.

The covenant now extends beyond ethnic Israel and is centred around Jesus as the fulfilment of God's previous promises. Jesus is the 'omega' of God's covenant of grace, initiated with Adam and centred on the Abrahamic line, but now fulfilled in his own Son, Jesus Christ. This is why Paul can declare in Galatians 3:26-29,

*"You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free male nor female for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."*

The covenant people of God who inherit the promise of Abraham are now a multi-ethnic people defined by their relationship to Jesus and marked out through the covenant sign of baptism (cf. Matt 28:16-20, Acts 2:38).

But the question is: does this New Testament covenant people become co-extensive with the decretally elect? Does the external/decretal division collapse into one after the day of Pentecost? Is the new covenant and the decree co-extensive?

These are important questions to answer as Reformed believers because the way that we answer them will affect how we see the church, how we view church membership, what we mean by the term "covenant children", and how we administer the sacraments.

There are good grounds for understanding the New Testament to maintain a similar external/internal, covenantal/decretal distinction that has been observed throughout redemptive history up to this point.

While the term "covenant" is not used widely in the New Testament, covenantal language is regularly used to describe the church. When Paul writes to the church in Corinth he addresses them as God's "covenant" community.<sup>4</sup> Even though he knows that not all of their number would be elect according to God's decree (2 Cor 11:13-15, 13:6; cf. 1 Cor 5:11, 11:18-19), he still describes them as "holy" and as "sanctified in Christ Jesus" (1 Cor 1:2). He is not referring to some inner sanctum within the congregation, but to the congregation as a whole. By addressing them as "the church" (*tē ekklēsia*, "the assembly"), as "saints", and as "holy", he is using "covenantal" categories rather than "decretal" ones.

When Peter addresses the church in 1 and 2 Peter he uses similarly exalted language, describing his readers as "elect exiles of the dispersion" (1 Pet 1:1), who have been set apart "for obedience to Jesus Christ for sprinkling with his blood" (1:2 cf. Ex 24:7-8), and as "a chosen people, royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God" (2:9). Yet he also warns that there will be false teachers among them who will ultimately be destroyed (2 Pet 2:1). Similar to the way in which Israel was warned to respond to their circumcised status with circumcised hearts, Peter also warns his readers to make their

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<sup>4</sup> I draw here from the work of Glenn N. Davies in his unpublished class notes, *The Relationship Between Covenant and Election*.

calling and election sure (2 Pet 1:10) and that if they persevere they will “never fall, [but] will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” (cf. 2 Pet 1:11).

When Paul describes the conversion of the Gentiles in Ephesians 2:12 he describes them as at one time “separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise”. Here Paul draws a direct parallel between what it meant for Israelites to belong to the covenant people and what it means for the Gentiles to become part of the church. Paul clearly sees the Gentiles joining the church in terms of them being grafted into the one covenant people and sharing in the one “promise”.

*“Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household.” (Eph 2:19)*

Notice how he describes the church using such exalted language, despite the fact that he warns the elders of the Ephesian church in Acts 20:30, “even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them”. He will also later write to Timothy who is pastoring the Ephesian church to warn him against Hymenaeus and Philetus, who were members of the church, but who “have wandered away from the truth” (2 Tim 2:17).

That this one covenant people, Jew and Gentile, are still a mixed group in the New Testament is pictured in Paul’s metaphor of the olive tree in Romans 11. In a similar way to Jesus’ use of the imagery of the vine in John 15, Paul describes the covenant people, the church, as an olive tree with branches being broken off and other branches being grafted in. The challenge he issues to both Jews and Gentiles is that they should not take their place in the olive tree for granted. Covenant membership needs to be responded to with covenant obedience. The covenant tree is made up of those who are united to Christ through membership in his body, but some of those branches may well in the end be broken off (cf. Rom 11:19-24).

Finally, when Jesus addresses the churches in Revelation 2-3, he addresses the church as a mixed body that needs to be challenged to live out its identity, and among whom there will be some who are disobedient, some who will not “overcome”, and who are therefore at risk of missing out on salvation.

#### **4.2.4 Conclusion**

From this brief survey we must conclude that, in continuity with the Old Testament and in accord with Jesus’ teaching, there is both an external covenant people marked out by membership in the church and a smaller subsection of that body that are decretally chosen and who will ultimately be saved.

Therefore, when we refer to the church as the covenant people of God, it is this externally recognisable group, united to Christ by nature of their membership with his people, and if they are old enough, their profession of faith in him as Saviour and Lord.

This appears true for children of believers also. In continuity with the Old Testament we see the children of believers included in the covenant community in the following ways:

- Just as Abraham was told that the covenant God had given was with “him and his descendants after him”, so Peter declares on the day of Pentecost the gospel is for “you and your children” (Acts 2:39).
- Just as the descendants of Israel were addressed as God’s covenant people (Deut. 5:3), and were commanded to teach their children as members of God’s covenant people (Deut. 6:4-9, Ps 78:1-8), so in the New Testament, children of believers are called to covenant obedience (Eph 6:1-3; Col 3:20).
- Just as in the Old Testament covenant children shared in the holiness of Israel as God’s people, so too the children of believers are declared clean and holy (1 Cor 7:14), an expression that demonstrates they stand in covenantal relationship with God.

Throughout God’s different administrations of the covenant of grace, the children of covenant members have always been included. Just as Paul describes the new covenant as an extension of the covenants of “the” promise in Ephesians 2:12, so we would expect that to continue to be the case. From the information we have surveyed above the language of the New Testament appears to support this conclusion.

But just as we cannot see into the heart of an adult to know their true status, so we can’t see into the heart of a child to know their true status. When we describe the children of believers as “covenant children” we are confessing that they belong to the covenant people of God. They are united to Christ by nature of their union with him in his body, the church, and consequently are members of his church. This membership does not signify or guarantee their elect status any more than it does for adults. With that covenantal status comes both enormous blessing, but also the very real responsibility of showing themselves to be covenant keepers.

### ***4.3 Administration of the Sacraments in the New Testament***

We must now ask how this outward/inward or covenantal/decretal division functions with regard to the sacraments in the New Testament. In other words, on what basis are the sacraments administered? Are they administered on the basis of an outward/covenantal union with Christ and his people, or on the basis of the church having insight into the genuineness of faith, and consequently the person’s elect status?

#### ***4.3.1 The Administration of the Sacraments in Jesus’ Ministry***

When we look at the ministry of Jesus we must keep in mind that we are dealing with a different stage of redemptive history; circumcision and the sacrificial festivals were still the signs of the covenant during the time of Jesus ministry.

One thing we do see is that circumcision continues to be administered to covenant children on the basis of God’s command to Abraham. Both John the Baptist (Luke 1:59) and Jesus (Luke 2:21) were circumcised on the eighth day according their membership in the covenant people of Israel. That the practice continued to be widely administered is implied by Jesus comments to the Pharisees in John 7:22.

Of greater significance is Judas Iscariot's participation in the Passover, or Last Supper, with Jesus. Despite Jesus' knowledge of what Judas would do and his ultimate destiny, Jesus still allowed Judas to participate in this sacramental meal. For three years Judas had covenantally united himself with Jesus and now Judas participates in this covenantal sacrament. It appears that his qualification for participation was not his decretally elect status, but his membership of the covenant people.

From the slim details we can glean, we conclude that, consistent with the Old Testament, during Jesus' ministry the participation in the sacraments was according to covenant membership and not according to the genuineness of faith; according to a person's external union with God's people and not according to their elect status before God.

### ***4.3.2 The Administration of Baptism in the New Testament***

When we move beyond the cross, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, we find the sacraments transformed. The signs of the covenant are changed to reflect the fact that they now point back to the fulfilment of the promise given to Eve and to Abraham of a promised seed who would defeat the serpent and bring blessing to the nations.

With regard to how and to whom baptism is administered in the New Testament the evidence is interpreted in conflicting ways by both the Baptist and Reformed/Presbyterian traditions. Nowhere are we given an explicit description of how and to whom baptism is to be administered. Two things do seem evident though.

The first is that baptism is administered on the basis of external/covenantal factors rather than trying to look into the secret decree of God. For example, on the day of Pentecost when Peter preached the gospel we are told that 3,000 people were baptised on one day (Acts 2:41). Logistically it would have been impossible to examine the faith of each individual in any real depth to try to discern signs of being decretally elect. It is far more likely that each person was baptised on the basis of their confession and their desire to unite themselves with Christ and his covenant people.

The truth of this appears to be played out in the example of Simon the Sorcerer in Acts 8. In Acts 8:8-13 we read the story of Simon hearing the gospel, which culminates in the comment, "Simon himself believed and was baptised" (Acts 8:13). Then, however, Simon seeks to buy the privilege of bestowing the Holy Spirit, incurring the wrath of Peter who declares, "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord in the hope that he may forgive you for having such a thought in your heart" (Acts 8:20-22). The question of Simon's ultimate fate is left hanging, but it would appear that the apostles baptised him on the basis of his confession and his covenantal union with the church rather than seeking to peer behind the curtain into God's decretal will.

A similar dynamic appears to be at work in the case of some of Paul's ministry companions who later turn away from the faith. For example, twice Paul acknowledges Demas as his fellow worker (Col 4:14, Philemon 1:24). No doubt he had been baptised, and yet it seems he chose the world over Christ (2 Tim 4:10). Paul's language leaves us with the distinct impression that he had fallen away and was lost.

It appears from the examples we have in Scripture that baptism was administered on the basis of a person's confession and their union with Christ through participation in the church and not on the basis of the genuineness of their faith or the church's knowledge of their elect status.

The baptisms of the Ethiopian eunuch and the Philippian jailor seem to reinforce this. In both cases there is no evidence of their faith being tested over an extended period of time, nor are they plied with questions to test the depth of their theological understanding. They make a basic confession and are baptised on the basis of that.

Baptism, then, does not guarantee the salvation of the one who receives it, nor does the church in administering it try to peer behind the curtain into the secret election of God. Baptism is administered as the sign of the new covenant to those who profess faith in Christ and join themselves to God's covenant people.

Consistent with what we have seen regarding circumcision in the Old Testament, baptism is both the sign of union with Christ and his body and a seal of the faithfulness of God to his covenant promise fulfilled in Christ. However, baptism is also a call to respond in covenant faithfulness. This is demonstrated by Jesus' command in Matthew 28:19 where Jesus links baptism with discipleship and teaching, and Paul's use of the symbolism of baptism in Romans 6:1-4 as the basis for his appeal to holy living.

We can now address the question of what it means when we baptise infants in light of the nature of the covenant and the basis on which baptism was administered in the New Testament.

The following arguments from Scripture suggest that the New Testament church is right to baptise covenant infants:

- From the covenant: The signs and seals of the covenant ought to be applied to those with whom God makes a covenant. It is evident from the Old and New Testament that the covenant includes infants. In Genesis 17:7 God declares that "I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you." In Acts 2:38-39 Peter declares to all the Israelites gathered at Pentecost, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself." This leads to the next point.
- From circumcision: The necessity of baptism is the same as that of circumcision. Circumcision was to be administered to infants under the old covenant according to the command of God, therefore also infant baptism under the new. According to Paul in Colossians 2:10-12 baptism is the New Testament counterpart of circumcision and therefore succeeds it in the New Testament: "In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead." Since the disciples (who had

received the command to baptise “all nations” in Matthew 28:19-20 [point (1) above]) had been circumcised as infants, then surely Christ would have needed to specify that baptism (its New Testament counterpart) is to be withheld from covenant children if the administration of the covenant sign to infants was now being discontinued under the new covenant, rather than have to explicitly say it should be applied to infants (as Baptists wrongly allege).

- From their holiness: Finally, because the children of believers are holy, they ought therefore to be baptised: “For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy” (1 Cor 7:14). Paul calls them “holy” not because they are inherently holy, but because they are federally holy (i.e., through the representation of their parents and their belonging to the church). Moreover, the children of believers are considered “in the Lord” (Eph 6:1), while their responsibility to obey their parents is reinforced by the covenantal obligation and promise of the fourth commandment (Eph 6:1-3), demonstrating their membership in the covenant, along with its responsibilities and privileges.
- From kingdom membership: Because children belong to the kingdom of heaven by the declaration of Christ, they should therefore receive the sign of their belonging: “Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people, but Jesus said, ‘Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.’ And he laid his hands on them and went away” (Matt 19:13-15). If it is right to bring infants to Christ, then surely it is only appropriate to administer baptism to them, the symbol of their communion with Christ.
- From household baptisms: In the New Testament we have examples of four complete households being baptised when the head of the household comes to faith (Acts 16:13-15, 31-34, 1 Cor 1:14-16).<sup>5</sup> While it is not specifically mentioned that there were children in any of these households, it is reasonable to assume there would have been. In any case, whether there were children or not, the significant fact is that these household baptisms reveal a consistency of approach between the Old and New Testaments. If the head of the household stood in covenant union with God so the rest of the family shared in the blessing of their faith and were thereby marked with the sign of the covenant. This naturally leads to the next point.
- From the command of Christ: In Matthew 28:19-20 Jesus says, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Christ’s command to baptise “all nations” must also include the command to baptise infants, for what applies to the genus (“all

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<sup>5</sup> In 1 Corinthians 1:15 Paul makes mention of baptising Crispus, but in Acts 18:8 we learn that this whole household was baptised.

nations") must also apply to the species within that genus (infants).<sup>6</sup> That this command to baptise all nations includes the baptism of infants is proved by the custom of the apostles who baptised entire families.

As we have seen from the evidence of the New Testament, it is correct to conclude that the children of believers are still members of the covenant, and therefore should continue to be given the sign of the covenant.

However, what we understand of its administration must be shaped by what we have also seen of how baptism was administered in the New Testament more generally.

As with adults, infants are baptised on the basis of their covenantal union with Christ through the faith of their parents and their union with his body, the church. This union is an external and therefore federal union rather than a decretal union. It is to go beyond the scope of Scripture to infer from their baptism, or their covenant membership that they are truly elect.<sup>7</sup> Baptism declares the gospel promise through its symbolism and, when understood against the background of redemptive history, the faithfulness of God to his promises. But it is to go beyond Scripture to say that it guarantees the salvation of the individual. Only time will show whether the child grows up to be a covenant keeper or a covenant breaker. The fact remains that whatever proves to be ultimately true with regard to their decretal election, children belong to the external covenant community and are rightly administered with its sign. This membership brings both enormous blessing but also serious responsibility.

### ***4.3.3 The Administration of Lord's Supper in the New Testament***

Having examined the administration of baptism in the New Testament and its implications for why we administer baptism to covenant children, we must now ask the same of the Lord's Supper.

Like baptism, we find little by way of clear command about how, and to whom, the Lord's Supper is to be administered.

We have already noted the theological context for Judas Iscariot's participation in the Passover/Last Supper with Jesus and suggested that his participation was not dependant on the genuineness of his faith, or his elect status, but his confession and on his membership in the covenant people of God.

The passage that bears most directly on the administration of the Lord's Supper is 1 Corinthians 11:17-34. However, even this passage is not addressing the question as a matter of abstract church polity. It is addressing a particular abuse of the Lord's Supper that was occurring in Corinth.

The nature of this context has been acknowledged by exegetes on both sides of the debate about children's participation in the Supper. For example, Knight acknowledges

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<sup>6</sup> **Genus** is a biological taxonomic classification, which ranks below **family** and above **Species**

<sup>7</sup> This impinges on the issue of "presumptive regeneration" which has been a topic of debate in Reformed churches over the centuries. By stating that baptism is not administered on the basis of a child's decretal election doesn't necessarily answer the question underlying the debate about "presumptive regeneration", it simply acknowledges that the child's elect status is not the qualification for baptism.

that the issue in Corinth was primarily about disunity and a lack of regard and love for other members of the church. However, he argues that Paul moves from the specific situation in Corinth in 1 Corinthians 11:17-22, 30-34 to more general instructions about the Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:23-29. The language of the more general instructions demonstrate that they transcend the Corinthian situation and therefore can, and should be applied to situations beyond the original context.<sup>8</sup>

Three detailed studies of this passage have been conducted by previous Synodical committees, one of which (1988), found that the passage did provide grounds for the CRCA to maintain its current practice of requiring a public profession of faith as a prerequisite for participation in the Supper. The other two studies, 1994 and 2000, concluded that the passage did not preclude participation of covenant children on the basis of covenant membership.<sup>9</sup>

Yet, a more fundamental question to ask is: What was Paul's intention in writing this passage? Was it Paul's intention to delineate who was qualified to partake in the Lord's Supper? It's important to note that nowhere in the passage does Paul indicate that certain people, or groups of people, should be excluded, even if we may ultimately conclude that is the practical outworking of applying Paul's instructions. In fact, the problem in the Corinthian church was that certain groups were being excluded because of the way the Supper was being conducted. Paul's desire is to increase unity in the church by encouraging discernment and reflection when participating in the Supper. That church unity is central to Paul's understanding of the Supper is further reinforced by his analogy in 1 Corinthians 10:17 where participation in the bread and the cup are a symbol of our oneness as Christ's body. The body, or covenant community, as we have already concluded, which includes covenant children.

While Paul never expressly commands that some be excluded, he does nonetheless clearly teach that the Lord's Supper is to involve active participation and a level of understanding of what the Supper represents. Those who partake in the Supper should do so remembering Christ's death (v.25), proclaiming Christ's death (v.26), acknowledging the Supper's significance (v.27), examining oneself (v.28), and discerning the body (i.e., recognising that the elements represent Christ's death for them, v.29).

Paul's primary concern appears not to keep people away, but that those who participate should do so in a way that honours the Supper and understands its significance.

Paul's concluding statement serves to reinforce this point, "*So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for each other*" (v.33). Paul assumes that even those in Corinth who have been abusing the Supper, those who have created the need for the commands of vv.27-29, will participate, but urges them to reform their view of the Supper and, in light of that, the church.

There will always be a variety of spiritual maturity within the church, even among those

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<sup>8</sup> George W. Knight, *Children and the Lord's Supper*. (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2011), 78-83.

<sup>9</sup> The exegetical notes in 2000 Synod report contain qualifying comments about how the whole committee did not agree at every point. The eventual recommendation was, "That admission to the Lord's Supper should be on the basis of covenant membership (as with baptism), and is available to the covenant child at an age when a child can benefit from the teaching the Super brings".

who have professed their faith. This is a truth that Scripture recognises in a number of places.<sup>10</sup> The commands that Paul gives here will be fulfilled at a variety of different depths of understanding depending on the spiritual maturity of the individual person. Each person will remember and proclaim Jesus death, the meaning and significance of the Supper, and, in light of these things, their attitude toward others in the covenant community according their spiritual maturity. For those with a mental handicap and for new believers that will be at the simpler end of the continuum. For those who have been Christians all their lives, or who have studied theology, they will fulfil the commands with a greater depth of understanding. Significantly, Paul does not attempt to draw a line in the sand, but focuses instead of on the genuineness of the actions.

The question we need to ask is, how does this relate to covenant children? We have already demonstrated that the children of believers are full members of the church, a truth that is expressed in the fact that we baptise them. How, then, does their status as covenant members affect their relationship to the Lord's Supper and the way we view their fledgling faith?

Historically, Reformed churches have taken a somewhat sceptical view of the faith of covenant children. That is, it has been assumed that the faith of young children is not sufficient for participation in the Supper, and the burden of proof has been on them to demonstrate that they really do have genuine faith. This has resulted in the church historically holding off on allowing covenant children to profess their faith, often until their later teen years, or even their early twenties. Because of the way we have linked participation in the Lord's Supper with a public profession it means they have also been held back from the Lord's Supper.

However, it must be asked how in this arrangement are we treating covenant children any different from pagan children? For the pagan child/person who has not grown up with the privileges and blessings of covenant membership, it's understandable that the burden of proof would lay with them to 'prove' that they understand and believe the gospel message.

However, as we have already demonstrated, the Bible takes a very different view of the children of believers. It describes them as "holy" and as "clean". They are not just half members of the covenant, but full members. They grow up absorbing the gospel in any number of ways, being taught to pray to God as 'their Father', and giving thanks with their family and church community for Jesus 'their' Saviour.

None of this suggests that these children do not have to respond to the gospel with faith and own it for themselves. As we have shown, this has always been the case, and there is a danger in presuming on covenant membership. However, there is also a reality, often expressed in the testimonies of covenant children, that there was never a time when they didn't know Jesus as their Lord and Saviour. From a very young age they have believed. What they have understood of that has grown steadily over time and they have owned that confession with increasing depth of understanding, but the object and the genuineness of their faith has not changed, only its depth of understanding.

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<sup>10</sup> For example see, Phil 3:15-16, Heb 5:11-6:2, 1 Cor 11:19.

The reality of their status as covenant children should encourage us to take a generous rather than a sceptical view of their fledgling faith. After all, the Bible describes them as “holy” and “clean” before the Lord. As we have demonstrated, while these are not salvific but covenantal categories, they still demonstrate that we shouldn't treat covenant children in the same way we would treat pagan children.

This generous approach to the faith of covenant children aligns with Jesus' attitude to covenant children. A number of times during Jesus' ministry children are excluded from his ministry or their faith is denigrated, but in every case, Jesus counters the prevailing critical attitudes with a generous one. In Luke 18:15-17 (cf. Matt 19:13-15) we read that people *were bringing* (the imperfect tense suggests that this was a frequent occurrence in Jesus' ministry) babies and children to Jesus to have him touch them, presumably to be blessed. The disciples, however, didn't agree that they should be there and rebuked the people. We are not told why the disciples had this attitude towards the children; maybe they thought Jesus wouldn't be interested in children; maybe they thought the children wouldn't understand; or maybe they thought children weren't important enough. The Scriptures don't make it clear what their motives were.

However, what is clear is that Jesus wants nothing to stand between him and the children being brought to him. *“Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these”* (Matt 19:14). He then uses the children as an example of those who will inherit the kingdom of God. To his disciples and others who thought small children should be kept away from him, Jesus had a strong counter message.

In another similar passage in Matthew 18, Jesus reinforces how much he values the example and simple faith of children by using a child to demonstrate the attitude that is necessary to enter the kingdom of God. He then shows in the verses that follow the incredible importance of the way we treat children by saying in verse 5, *“...whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me”*.

A second example of Jesus' attitude to covenant children occurs at the culmination of his triumphal entry in Matthew 21:14-16. As Jesus enters the temple courts he is surrounded by the religious outcasts of the day, as well as a group of children shouting praise to Jesus. We read in verse 15, *“...when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying out in the temple, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” they were indignant<sup>and</sup> they said to him, “Do you hear what children are saying?” And Jesus said to them, “Yes; have you never read, ‘Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise?’”*

The religious leaders denigrated the children's simple praise, but Jesus, quoting Psalm 8, reassures them that God delights in the simple praise and faith of covenant children.

The practical outworking of this 'generous' approach to the faith of covenant children means that when a young child, perhaps even as young as early primary school, shows an understanding of the gospel, a simple but saving trust in Christ, a basic understanding of the Lord's Supper such that they can fulfil the process described of 1 Corinthians 11 in an age-and-ability appropriate way, and desire to celebrate Jesus in the Lord's Supper, we should honour it and help them explore it, rather than dismiss it as childish and put barriers in the way of them expressing it on account of our doubt.

Our doubt can actually have a negative pastoral impact on the faith of covenant children as they can become confused about what real faith actually is and start searching for some mystical experience that assures them that they have 'enough' faith, or think it's about reaching some level of moral perfection. These entrenched misunderstandings can be hard to undo and obscure the grace of God in the gospel and the simplicity of faith.

Confessionally, Reformed Churches have spoken of the sacraments as "means of grace", ways in which Jesus strengthens the faith of his people (BC Art.35, HC Q&A 73). If we believe this, then we would contend that covenant children, though young in faith, need the grace of Jesus as much as any other member of the church. To withhold the Lord's Supper from them because we dismiss their faith as childish or insufficient may well be doing them a spiritual disservice.

If elders together with parents are satisfied that the child has an age-and-ability appropriate understanding and faith then should not that confession be honoured?<sup>11</sup> This is in line with what we have demonstrated regarding the participation of the covenant community in the sacraments in both the Old and New Testaments. Participation is on the basis of belonging to the covenant community and on the basis of one's confession, rather than on the basis of election, which we can never know with any certainty.

Some might raise the concern that a child might profess faith at a young age and then turn away when they get older. However, both the Scriptures and historical experience testify to the fact that just waiting longer to try and discern the genuineness of faith and look for 'signs of election' is no guarantee that a person won't fall away. Scripture warns us of people who were actively engaged in ministry (2 Tim 4:10; 1 John 1:1-20) but abandoned the gospel in the end. Likewise, the history of our churches is littered with stories of people who have professed their faith at an older age, but have sadly gone on to become covenant breakers.

Membership in the covenant and confession of faith is our only guide, and we have already demonstrated that there is good theological and Scriptural reason for taking a generous, rather than sceptical, approach to the faith of covenant children.

See the section below entitled '**Practicalities of Children taking the Lord's Supper**' for recommendations for how this process might look.

#### **4.4 Implications for Church Membership**

It might be asked at this point, what are the implications of this for a public profession of faith and for how we understand membership? Are we expecting a child as young as early primary school to publicly profess their faith and engage in all the activities associated with membership in the church?

As we outline below, we don't want to dictate to individual church council's the mechanism they use to gauge the suitability of covenant children participating in the

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<sup>11</sup> The fact that parents are involved with this process is actually very important, as in Scripture, they, rather than the church, are charged with being the primary nurturers of covenant children's faith (Eph 6:4), a truth that our current system doing profession of faith at an older age often overlooks.

Lord's Supper. But the question of church membership is a more complex one.

As has been recognised in past Synod reports (1994 [III 201-203], 2000 [III-27]), if covenant children were to be welcomed to participate in the Lord's Supper from a young age, apart from a public profession of faith, it would impact the way we view their membership in the church. At present we have two categories of church membership; baptised members and communicant members, which is a theological rather than practical distinction.

This dividing of the covenant community into different theological levels of membership has been driven by the church's historic understanding of what qualifies one to participate in the Lord's Supper based on 1 Corinthians 11. Its legacy has been a system of membership that really finds no support (either prescriptive or descriptive) in the New Testament.

The New Testament's sole criteria for church membership appears to be baptism. In the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20 Jesus commanded the apostles, *"...therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded."* Here Jesus states that the rite of passage into the life of discipleship, and therefore into membership in the church, is baptism.

Peter reflects a similar paradigm in Acts 2:38, *"Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins ... This promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call."*

Nowhere in Scripture do we get the impression that there is a second (or deeper) level of membership. If a person is baptised they are a member of the external covenant community and therefore a member of Jesus' church.

We have already established (above) the Scriptural reasons for acknowledging the children of believers as covenant members and the grounds for baptising them. There seems, then, no biblical warrant for making them a different class of church member. We would concur with the 1994 Synod Report which concluded, *"... there is no evidence in either the Old or the New Testament that membership in the covenant is anything but full membership."*

However, just because covenant children are full members of the church by nature of their baptism, doesn't mean that there are not grounds for having a practical or legal distinction within the one membership, which recognises that taking on voting and leadership responsibilities requires not just faith, but a greater maturity. For this purpose, church membership could be classified into Baptised Members and Voting Members. This distinction is not a theological one, but a practical one. Thus, we are not suggesting two different levels of membership, but different levels of responsibility within the one membership.

This distinction better reflects the connection between the sacraments in that they don't apply to two different levels of covenant membership, but all church members. We would concur with B.B. Warfield when he said,

*"God established his Church in the days of Abraham and put children into it. They must remain there until He puts them out. He has nowhere put them out. They are still then*

*members of His church and as such entitled to its ordinances.”<sup>12</sup>*

This, however, needs to be held in tension with the truth we have already established that baptised members still need to come to an age-and-ability appropriate faith and understanding of the sacrament before participation is appropriate.

In the past where lowering the age of public profession of faith in order to enable younger children to participate in the Supper has been considered, the problem has been what does that mean for their participation in other responsibilities of membership.

However, by reforming our theology of church membership this problem falls away. Children can participate in the Lord's Supper as full covenant members when their parents and the church council consider they have an age-and-ability appropriate faith and understanding, and then take on the fuller responsibilities of church membership when they become voting members. The age for becoming a voting member could be set at age 18.

#### **4.5 Implications for Public Profession of Faith**

Some might ask where this leaves our current practice of *'public'* profession of faith? In numerous places the Scriptures uphold the idea that we will profess our faith publicly (Rom 10:9-10, Matt 10:32, 2 Tim 1:8 and 1 Tim 6:12).

Doing a public profession of faith and sharing their testimony is for many young people a challenging experience that forces them out of their comfort zones. For some young people the fear of getting up the front can hold them back from doing a public profession of faith, long after they have put their faith in Christ. Our current system of making a public profession of faith the gateway to Lord's Supper means that covenant children are held back from the Supper, not because they don't have faith, but because the public ceremony seems overwhelming. However, by allowing younger children to profess their faith privately before their parents and the elders, it will allow them to participate in the Lord's Supper without confusing the faith required to participate with all that goes into the public ceremony.

However, for those who are older, to do a public profession of faith and give a testimony to the grace of God in their lives is actually a very good spiritual discipline. It forces young people to step out in faith despite their fear and allows them to own their faith in Jesus publicly.

It may well be that at the time of moving into voting membership and accepting the full scope of membership responsibilities is the perfect time for a young person to stand up before the church and make a public profession of faith, owning their faith publicly, and giving testimony to the grace of God in their lives.

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<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Cornelius Venema "Covenant Theology and Baptism" in *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism* ed. Gregg Strawbridge (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2003).

## **5. Practicalities of Children Taking the Lord's Supper**

### **5.1 Introduction**

Elders are to manage the affairs of the church well (1 Tim 5:17) and this should extend to the administration of the Lord's Supper. If we glean nothing else from 1 Corinthians 11 we should at least note that this is one area of church life that can be prone to abuse and disorder and will require the careful oversight of session.

If the CRCA was to remove an age limit for participating in the Lords Supper, each session would have to think carefully about how they gauge a child's readiness to participate.

### **5.2 Key Qualifications**

To remain in line with the confessions, session's should look for six key qualifications in a child before they receive the Lord's Supper:

1. They must profess faith in Jesus
2. There must be age appropriate evidence of this faith being lived out
3. They need to understand that Jesus died for them – giving his body and blood – to save them from their sin
4. They must understand that the bread reminds us of Jesus' body and that the wine/juice reminds us of his blood
5. They must understand that they are part of a church family whom they are to love and serve
6. They should be able to reflect on whether they have been living with Jesus as King. Mum and Dad can help them with this. If they have stopped, then they should stop taking the Lord's supper.

### **5.3 Basic Guidelines**

As mentioned above, elders must be actively involved in ensuring good order with regard to the Lord's Supper. This will require elders to carefully and intentionally design and implement a process whereby the readiness of a child to participate in the Supper may be ascertained. This will involve, in addition to the direct involvement of the elders, consultation with parents and children's ministry workers (where appropriate).

We should resist the urge to impose a set practice on *how* each session satisfies itself that a child meets the above requirements. The CRCA is now very diverse in terms of the sizes of its churches and the way in which its churches operate. This means each session will need to be proactive in designing a process that is appropriate for their own context. Sessions should also be mindful that their practice may need to change as their church changes. This should be a topic for church visitations.

Bearing the above in mind, it may be helpful to offer some basic guidelines. A reasonable process that could work well in most settings could be:

- The church is made aware that children are welcome at the Lord's Supper when their faith and understanding is such that participation will be meaningful and edifying.
- Parents are made aware of the above requirements and are encouraged to chat with their kids and think carefully about whether they apply to their children
- If parents feel their child is ready, they should contact the pastor/session
- A session member will contact the family (and children's ministry workers where appropriate) to ascertain whether they believe the child meets the above requirements. They would then report back to the rest of session.
- If session feels settled that the child is ready, permission will be granted for the child to participate in the Lord's Supper going forward.

## **6. Recommendations**

We respectfully recommend:

1. That Synod receive this report.
2. That, in the light of both the exegetical and confessional studies above, Synod remove any age limit on the participation of covenant children in the Lord's Supper.
3. That sessions take an active and intentional role in equipping and encouraging families to disciple their children in their understanding of the gospel and the Lord's Supper.
4. That we take a generous approach to the faith of covenant children and that in order for covenant child to participate in the Lord's Supper they must meet the following qualifications (from 5.2 above),
  - i. They must profess faith in Jesus
  - ii. There must be age appropriate evidence of this faith being lived out
  - iii. They need to understand that Jesus died for them – giving his body and blood – to save them from their sin
  - iv. They must understand that the bread reminds us of Jesus' body and that the wine/juice reminds us of his blood
  - v. They must understand that they are part of a church family whom they are to love and serve
  - vi. They should be able to reflect on whether they have been living with Jesus as King. Mum and Dad can help them with this. If they have stopped, then they should stop taking the Lord's Supper.

5. That sessions must take an active and intentional role in the process and consult with the parents and the child (and other children's ministry workers where appropriate).
6. That a system of church membership be established in the CRCA based on a practical rather than a theological division of the covenant community.
  - i. 'Baptised' members are all members who have been baptised into the covenant community. Sessions will have to keep a record of who among the 'baptised' membership participates in the Lord's Supper.
  - ii. 'Voting' members are those who have turned 18 and have 'publicly' professed their faith. They may vote as well as hold positions of leadership.
7. That the ceremony of 'public' profession of faith and commitment to the confessional standards be reserved for when covenant children have matured and are moving from 'baptised' membership to 'voting' membership.