

Children of the Covenant

a book for adults about children and Communion

by Glenn Cooper



*"Let the
little children
come to me"*

MATTHEW 19:14

Forward

What questions do you have about children and Communion?

This short book is to help adults talk to children about Communion. It also answers questions parents have about bringing children to Communion.

The Church Welcomes Children to Communion

Your church invites children to the Lord's Table. A growing number of Presbyterian congregations in Canada are welcoming children to Communion.

Why is this happening? An increasing number of sessions and congregations have been reconsidering the place of children at Communion. For years, children were excluded from Communion. Then the 1987 General Assembly encouraged sessions to invite "baptized children of faith to the Lord's Table." The General Assembly is the highest decision-making body of The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

Some people are still uncomfortable with the idea of children taking part in Communion. Maybe you're one of them.

"What if they are noisy and disrupt the service?"

"They won't understand what's going on!"

"They should have to make a public profession of faith before becoming fully part of the church and receiving the sacrament."

A True Story

After the 1987 General Assembly decision to allow baptized children of faith to the Lord's Table, the session of a small congregation in our Church studied the matter at several meetings but did not feel ready to make such a change in the life of that congregation. After all, children had never taken Communion in that church before. It was not something to be rushed into.

Some time later at a session meeting, an elder told about his granddaughter sitting beside him at Communion. When the bread and the cup arrived, she asked for some. The elder said, "No," and she asked, "Why not?"

He told the other members of session, "I didn't know what to tell her. I couldn't think of any reason not to let her have Communion." She was old enough to know that we have Communion because Jesus said to do it and that he is with his people when we have that meal.

The minister asked the other session members, "Why do we bar children from Christ's table?" Each elder answered, "I don't know."

And the minister said, "Neither do I."

The elder whose granddaughter had asked for Communion made a motion that baptized children of faith be included when the congregation celebrates Communion. Another elder seconded the motion, which passed unanimously.

Another True Story

The Bible says that some people were bringing their children to Jesus, but his disciples tried to send them away. Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs” (Luke 18:16).

Some Christian communities such as the Eastern Orthodox Church offer communion to infants on their baptism. A mixture of bread and wine is placed in a small spoon and fed to the child immediately after Baptism.

The books in the Bible that give the greatest detail about Jesus’ life and teaching are called “gospels”. Church tradition says that they were written by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Three of the four tell of Jesus’ disciples trying to keep children away from Jesus. People were bringing their children, and although none of the accounts says *why* the disciples spoke sternly to them, it was probably because they thought Jesus was too important and too busy to have time for children. The details are almost the same in each account, but there are some slight differences. If you want to compare them, the stories are found at Matthew 19:13-15; Mark 10:13-16; Luke 18:15-17.

The Bible says clearly that Jesus opened his arms to them and blessed them. Luke’s account says that people were bringing even infants to Jesus to be blessed. In the Presbyterian Church in Canada we do not follow the practice of giving Communion to a newly-baptized infant. The Church has, however, decided to let parents or guardians decide when their children will receive Communion.

Children Ask Questions About Communion

If your child asks you a question about faith and you’re not sure of the answer, it’s all right to say, “Well, I’m not sure. What do you think?” Often with children, the discussion is more important than the right answer.

If the question is, “Why do we sometimes eat bread and drink wine (or juice) in church?” it may be enough to say, “Because Jesus told his followers and friends to do it. And even though we can’t see him, Jesus is with us when we eat and drink like that.”

This may lead to another question about when Jesus is with us. (All the time.) And is there any time he is not with us. (No.)

Showing your faith to a child, though is more than words. St. Francis of Assisi is quoted as saying, “Preach always. If necessary, use words.” Adults are always preaching, or at least teaching. And children watch, and listen, and learn. Which can be a little bit scary. But it can also be a delight.

What if children disrupt the service?

Does your church have Church School during worship or at a separate time? Having Church School at a separate time allows children to attend worship with their parents and learn how to take part. If you have Church School at the same time as church, then make sure that you keep your child with you during worship from time to time—perhaps one Sunday a month—and during the summer or on the Sundays when there is no Church School. (For ideas on how to include children in worship, see *45 Ways to Involve Children in Worship*, by Dorothy Henderson, The Presbyterian Church in Canada, North York, Ontario, 1997.)

Churches soon get used to children’s disruptions that occasionally take place. But they also get to know, love and appreciate the children who are part of the church family. Disruptions diminish as children get older. The children who were making noise five or six years ago now comfort and entertain the little ones who have come along since. This means not getting too upset if your children wander over to where there is a baby.

Parents can bring plush toys, a sandwich or a bottle for young children, things that keep the child occupied quietly. Think “quiet”; avoid toy cars or candies wrapped in noisy paper.

If your child is old enough to read, help her with the hymn book by moving your finger along under the words. And stay sitting down if that’s easiest. She will soon learn how the hymn book “works.” If your congregation uses spoken or sung responses in worship, point them out in the bulletin, helping your child to feel part of the service by doing what the grown-ups do. Your child is more than “the church of the future.” She is also part of God’s family right now.

Any family, including the church family, makes room for children. We expect interruptions from our children at home. We may not always welcome such interruptions, but we don’t tell our children to go and live somewhere else until they learn not to interrupt. Interruptions are part of family life.

Will Children understand what is happening at Communion?

Who can fully explain what happens at Communion? The next time Communion is planned, how would we feel if someone came to our house and said, “Before you can receive Communion you have to tell me what it means.” Eight people would give eight different answers—ministers included!

We need to tell the story of our faith to our children. Because the Lord’s Supper is such an important part of our faith, we need to think of how we include our children in the sacrament. We do not wait until our children are 10 or 12 to allow them to eat because they do not know how the digestive system works. Nor do we withhold love from an infant because the baby can not yet explain what love it.

Our understanding of Communion, and of most things, changes through the years. Some of us used to think that Communion was a reward for being a certain age, for living in a proper way, or for standing up in church and saying that we believed in God and in Jesus and in the Holy Spirit.

In the Bible, though, we often read of Jesus sharing a meal with people who were called sinners and with people that “proper folk” considered less than desirable dinner companions. He was strongly criticized for it. But he always replied that he came to bring people closer to God’s love, not to drive them away from it.

When he welcomed children and “undesirables,” Jesus showed that God’s love reaches out and asks us to respond. It does not wait for us to make the first move.

C.S. Lewis wrote a series of children’s books in the 1950s called *The Chronicles of Narnia*. He was a well-known Christian and the author of many books about the Christian faith. He was once asked why he had never written anything about holy Communion. He replied that our Lord said, “Take and eat.” Jesus did not say, “Take and explain.” It is enough, as a beginning, to know that Jesus told his followers and friends to share the loaf and cup.

Communion is many things, and these things have different importance for us at different times. It tells us how Jesus gave his life as a sacrifice for sinners. Communion reminds us how he fed many thousands who were hungry—including children (Matthew 14:21; 15:38). One account of that feeding says that it was a child who brought a gift of food to Jesus to be distributed (John 6:9). Communion also tells people how to live together: receiving God’s gifts, giving thanks to God, and sharing with others.

Each of the following accounts tells of Jesus being criticized for eating with “the wrong kind of people”: Matthew 9:11-13; Mark 2:15-17; Luke 5:29-32; Luke 15:1-32. When he is criticized for eating with sinners, Jesus’ answer is always the same: He eats with them, not as a reward, but because they need his love and acceptance.

Children may be just beginning to understand what happens at Communion. But whatever our age, we can always learn more.

Should children not make a public profession of faith before becoming fully part of the church and receiving the sacrament?

When did we become a member of our family? It was not when we could spell our names or recite the names of a dozen relatives. It was when we were born. The other things came later. In the same way, we become a member of the church when we are baptized, not when we can say what being a Christian means. So the first thing to be said is that Baptism is the moment that marks our birth into the family of God. We spend the rest of our lives working on what that means.

Some Christians can point to a single moment and call it their moment of conversions. Many others can not, because they have felt they were part of the family of God since they were little children. Whatever may be the case in your life, you will have found that faith changes, grows, and develops. It involves us in times of delight, and also in times of doubt and uncertainty. These times are all part of growing as God's people.

Second, simply attending church on a regular basis these days is a public profession of faith. At one time church attendance may have been "the socially proper thing to do." That day is long past.

Third, worship often includes a statement of faith as part of worship—the Apostles' Creed, a section of *Living Faith*, produced by The Presbyterian Church in Canada in 1984, or some other statement of faith. Such a statement is certainly public, and certainly a profession of faith.

Fourth, there will still be a time for a formal public statement of faith. Our Church calls baptized members "covenant members" of the church. After a formal, public profession, the term is "professing members" of the church and it follows a time of study and preparation. Professing members participate fully in the life of the congregation including, for instance, voting to call a minister and to elect elders.

What Role Do Parents Play?

Parents and family are the first "church" that our children know. Church school classes, religion in life badges, and deliberate religious instruction help a child understand what it is to be part of the family of God. But their introduction to the Christian faith comes from their parents.

We may not always be comfortable with that idea. But think of it this way: God has entrusted you with your child. God has shown trust in you to raise, teach, and love the child.

Someone once said that a baby is a sign from God that there is hope for the future. Your child is growing up in a world that is different from the one you grew up in. But some things don't change—

- ◆ God's love
- ◆ The need for parents to love their children
- ◆ The existence of the family of God that we call the church
- ◆ The strength for life that we can receive through the church—from our Baptism, from teaching, from companionship, from being fed at Christ's Table.

In Conclusion...

Instead of looking at Communion as a “reward” for faith, we look at it as a way that God feeds or nurtures faith.

In the end, including children at Communion will enrich the church. Jesus said that “it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs” (Luke 18:16)

Every Christmas we celebrate God coming to us as a child at Bethlehem. By involving our children in all parts of worship including Communion, we may well see God coming to us again in child... this time our own.

All biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible (C 1989, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used with permission.)

Books and Resources

FOR ADULTS AND WORSHIP LEADERS

Cooper, Glenn. *A Family Meal: a guide to help sessions prepare to welcome children to the Lord's Supper*. The Presbyterian Church in Canada, North York, Ontario, 1997.

Cooper, Glenn. *Children of the Covenant: a book for adults about children and Communion*, The Presbyterian Church in Canada, North York, Ontario, 1997.

Henderson, Dorothy. *Jesus is With Us: a 3-part congregational study to help adults and children prepare for communion together*, The Presbyterian Church in Canada, North York, Ontario, 1997.

Henderson, Dorothy. *Encourage Children to Read the Great Stories of the Bible*, Equip magazine, The Presbyterian Church in Canada, North York, 1996.

Henderson, Dorothy. *45 Ways to Involve Children in Worship*, The Presbyterian Church in Canada, North York, Ontario, 1997.

FOR CHILDREN

Cooper, Glenn. *Jesus Welcomes You: A Book for Children about Communion*, The Presbyterian Church in Canada, North York, Ontario, 1997.

To order any of the above resources, call 1-800-619-7301 (Canada) or 416-441-1111; email bookroom@presbyterian.ca

Writer/Compiler: Glenn Cooper

Contributions: June Holohan, Patti and Stephen Farris, Dorothy Henderson

Production: Dorothy Henderson, Judee Archer Green

Design: Tim Faller Design Inc.

Illustrations: Chrissie Wysotski

Every effort has been made to trace copyrights on the materials included in this material. If any copyrighted material has nevertheless been included without permission and due acknowledgement, proper credit will be inserted in future printings after notice has been received.

© The Presbyterian Church in Canada

50 Wynford Drive, North York, Ontario M3C 1J7

Printed in Canada, 1997