

# Welcoming Children to the Lord's Table

Pastor Edward D. Seely, Th.M., Ph.D.

## INTRODUCTION

This presentation is a brief explanation of the most salient reasons why many Christians and churches are returning to the ancient practice of permitting young children to celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion. Their desire stems from and is based on the practice of doing so by God's people from Bible times and especially the Eastern branch of the church throughout history. The Western branch of the church permitted young children to partake of the elements until the Middle Ages, and then largely discontinued doing so for a variety of reasons that are now being reconsidered.

At issue is the age of the children to be admitted to the Lord's Table. Before proceeding to the reasons for permitting all children to participate in the sacrament, some parameters should be established in our consideration of this matter. I have expressed these parameters in an essay addressing another contemporary issue in the church, and the following guidelines, adapted to this issue, apply in this discussion as well.

Several parameters exist in our consideration and understanding of the relevant texts in the Bible and which guide our interpretation and conclusions with respect to children partaking of communion. First of all, the Bible, God's Word, is our standard, not our society's views. Second, we are not motivated by society but by the desire to be just (Deuteronomy 16:20, Micah 6:8) and to meet the requirements of the Kingdom of God. Third, we recognize that fine Christians including good scholars align themselves on both sides of this issue...With the historic Christian church we affirm our unity with and love for those who disagree with us: we are one in Christ. Fourth, we recognize that neither side has a clear chapter and verse that finally settles the disagreement to the complete satisfaction of all. However, I am persuaded that the argument which follows (the basic principles upon which it is based not being unique to me) carries the most weight and is to be preferred. Nevertheless, out of respect for our brothers and sisters in Christ who disagree, I am willing to consider the matter as one of those issues that comes under the Apostle Paul's classification and explanation of "disputable matters" in Romans 14.

When we examine the relevant texts in God's Word, we find that both sides (i.e., those affirming and those denying admission of children to the Lord's Table) can make what appears to be a strong case for their position. Therefore, the task before us can be expressed in a principle that has been well employed in other issues by Christians who hold to God's Word as being our highest authority. The hermeneutical principle, espoused and well-used by Martin Luther,<sup>1</sup> is that all we

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<sup>1</sup> Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, Rev. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959), p. 314. Walker quotes Luther, "what is not contrary to Scripture is for Scripture and Scripture for it." See also Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), p. 193.

need to demonstrate is that the Bible does not prohibit the admission of children to the sacrament of Holy Communion. As will be shown in the pages that follow, a careful examination of the whole of God’s Word indicates no such prohibition; moreover, it strongly indicates several reasons for admitting even the youngest children to the Lord’s Table. Nevertheless, we must do so following with great care the established rules of Biblical hermeneutics in order to “correctly handle the word of truth.” (2 Timothy 2:23)<sup>2</sup>

As mentioned above, the issue is the age of the children to be admitted to partake in Holy Communion. It must be stated at the outset for deliberation by members of a Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LC—MS) congregation, that the Commission on Theology and Church Relations in its most recent position paper on this subject concludes that children from infancy through early childhood should not receive the sacrament.<sup>3</sup> Basing its argument primarily on a common interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, the commission maintains that children in this age range cannot cognitively engage in the required mental and spiritual examination required in order to properly participate in the Lord’s Supper.

The commission wisely stops short of establishing a minimum age, recognizing the wide variance in human development and maturity in Christ. The paper suggests keeping the practice of allowing the pastor and parents to make the decision as to whether a given individual is ready to be admitted to the Lord’s Table, but it holds to the tradition of Luther and Calvin as well as other Reformers to not practice paedocommunion, the administration of the elements to children from infancy to puberty.

We thank God for the faithfulness and commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ and to following the Word of God that is the practice of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. I am also grateful to Luther, Calvin, and other outstanding Bible scholars, theologians, and fellow believers in and followers of Christ Jesus through the centuries who have given us a solid and strong heritage based firmly on God’s Word.

At the same time, we’re grateful for the basic Reformation principle of constantly reforming our interpretation, understanding, and practice to the Word of God. Therefore, as we engage this discussion, it is necessary to look again not only at the often-cited key passage in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 but at the rest of the Scripture, including the references to God’s covenant, what Biblical scholars call a major motif, or key theme, running throughout the Bible, which, curiously, the LC—MS commission did not at all mention. In so doing, we will see much more that will inform us in our decision-making as to the inclusion of children in Holy Communion.

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<sup>2</sup> Edward D. Seely, “*Does 1 Timothy 2:11-15 Prohibit the Ordination of Women to Church Office?*” P. 1 <http://www.fromacorntoak12.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Does-1-Timothy-2.11-15-Prohibit-Women-from-Ordination-to-Church-Office.pdf> (Accessed 2/3/16) Hermeneutics, from the Greek word meaning to interpret, is the discipline of the study and application of principles of interpretation of literary texts, including those principles specifically applicable to the Bible.

<sup>3</sup> Commission on Theology and Church Relations, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, “Knowing What We Seek and Why We Come: Questions and Answers Concerning the Communing of Infants and Young Children,” September 13, 2014, pp. 4, 6, 8.

1. Should children be admitted to the Lord's Table? The church has historically based its answer to that question on God's Word and the Biblical theology of the relationship of the sacraments.
  - a. In the early church, evidence exists at least from the middle of the third century A.D., that all who were baptized were admitted to the Lord's Table.
  - b. For well over the first thousand years of the history of the church, children, even infants, were given the Lord's Supper, and some churches still do so today.
  - c. How did the early church, and how do many churches today, arrive at that decision?
2. When we read the Bible, and when we consider the historic Christian theology that is based on the Bible, we must remember that key doctrines at the core of Christianity are based on understanding the relationship of several Scriptural texts, and are not found in a particular chapter and verse.
  - a. Rather these concepts, such as the Trinity (a word that does not occur in the Bible but which accurately summarizes the Bible's revelation of who God is), are understood as the correct interpretation of several passages of God's Word that *all together* inform us of a major doctrine running throughout Scripture but are not reduced to one succinct statement in any particular passage, though several passages in both the Old and New Testaments refer to all three Persons of the trinity in the same verse. (Isaiah 61:1; Matthew 28:19)
  - b. This reality is also true of infant baptism. Please think carefully on this very important matter.
    - 1) Be prepared to explain this historic understanding and practice of Biblical interpretation to others, especially those following the Reformation who have branched off from the traditional understanding of theology.
    - 2) And refuse to accept their framing of the argument with the unwarranted premise that any true understanding of a Biblical concept is verified by being able to cite a chapter and verse to support that concept. **THIS IS WHY THOSE WHO BUY INTO THAT MISTAKEN ASSUMPTION TYPICALLY LOSE THE ARGUMENT ABOUT INFANT BAPTISM TO OUR FELLOW CHRISTIANS, FOR EXAMPLE THOSE IN SUCH TRADITIONS AS HELD BY BAPTIST AND PENTECOSTAL CHURCHES.**
      - a) This doesn't mean you can't cite plenty of Scripture to support your doctrine; you can, but, as we'll see shortly, you'll need several passages to show the proper Biblical basis for the concept and not just one.
      - b) Before we even begin to explain infant baptism, we need to explain this reality concerning historic Christian theology.

- c) Then we need to explain the meaning, significance, and applications of the covenant, this major motif of Scripture that is essential for understanding God's plan of salvation pointing to and fulfilled in Jesus Christ.
- It would be good to warn the person(s) to whom you are explaining this understanding of Biblical interpretation, that they need to do some careful thinking, which God has called us to do (Isaiah 1:18) to rightly explain the word of truth. (2 Timothy 2:15) *We cannot "rightly explain" the Word of truth with the bumper sticker mentality of this sound-bite age in which we live.* The profound truths of God's Word pertaining to the great matters of life and eternity cannot be satisfactorily reduced to slogans and soundbites. While the Gospel message at its core is so simple small children can understand it, it is also so deeply profound as to challenge the most intelligent minds in every generation. It is with regard to these more sophisticated matters many questions come, such as the one before us, so we need to think carefully.
- d) Thus, the strongest, but not the only, basis for the historic understanding of infant baptism is in the concept of God's covenant with Israel that he established with Abraham in Genesis 17:7-14. Understanding this major theme throughout God's Word, the covenant, is a key to unlocking the meaning of many subjects in God's revelation.
- 1- The most common word for covenant, בְּרִית *berîth*, occurs 286 times in the Old Testament and 33 times (διαθήκη *diathēkē*) in the New Testament. On numerous other occasions references occur to covenants and covenantal relationships apart from the use of the word covenant.
    - a- When God tells us something over 300 times, we can conclude he's trying to get our attention, right?!
    - b- Do you recall your mother telling you, and have you said to your children, "How many times have I told you....Are you listening to me?!" Yes, I also remember.
  - 2- Further, we should notice a very important distinction between the Old Covenant in the Old Testament (OT) and the New Covenant in the New Testament (NT), the first reference to which is in the OT (Jeremiah 31:31-34), that Jesus mentioned at the Last Supper and that is even in Paul's quote in the passage under consideration in 1 Corinthians 11! The distinction is in the Greek word translated new. In the Greek translation of the Bible there are two main words for new.
    - a- νέος *neos*, which means new in time or in origin, i.e., brand new.
    - b- καινός *kainos*, which means new in nature or in quality. Guess which one is used in the Bible for the new covenant. If you guessed *kainos* you are correct! Beginning in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, called the *Septuagint* (which was the primary translation of

the Bible at the time of Jesus' life here on earth, and that of the apostles), the first reference to the new covenant, that occurs in Jeremiah 31:31-34, uses *kainos* to translate new. *Kainos* is also the main word for new in the New Testament's references to the new covenant, including as Jesus said, in the new covenant in his blood! (1 Corinthians 11:25)

What is the significance of this distinction? It is huge! That the new covenant is new in the sense of *kainos* (especially when seen in the context of the Genesis 17:7 statement that the covenant is everlasting) means there is a continuity between the old and the new covenants and that everything is *not completely* new. Even that which is new is not brand new or completely new. For example, the covenant meal in the old covenant, Passover, has been replaced by another meal in the new covenant, the Lord's Supper.

Another example is seen in Revelation 21. The new heaven and the new earth (the Greek word for new being *kainos* in both instances) will have a continuity with the present earth (and heaven), as we see in such passages as Revelation 21:24-27 and Isaiah 60. While no sin or evil from this present earth and age will ever be part of the new heaven and the new earth, the good of the present age "will be brought into it." (Revelation 21:26)

- 3- The covenant is an everlasting relationship God has established with his people. (17:7)
- 4- The sign and seal of membership in the covenant was circumcision. (17:10-11)
- 5- The privilege of the covenant sign was commanded by God to be given to every male, natural-born, adopted, or bought as a slave, AND THE CIRCUMCISION WAS TO BE DONE ON THE EIGHTH DAY. (17:12)
- 6- A VERY IMPORTANT OBSERVATION: NOWHERE IN THE BIBLE DOES GOD RESCIND THE PRIVILEGE OF INFANTS TO RECEIVE THE SIGN AND SEAL OF THEIR MEMBERSHIP IN THE COVENANT.
- 7- In Galatians 3:26-29 we read that in Christ we are heirs of the promise of God's covenant with Abraham, which includes our infant children.
- 8- In Colossians 2:9-12 Paul states that baptism replaces circumcision as a sign of covenant membership.

e) *Since the covenant with Abraham is everlasting; since the new (kainos) covenant has continuity with the old covenant; since baptism replaces circumcision required for infants as the sign and seal of membership in the covenant; since children in the Old Testament participated in the Passover (Exodus 12:3-4; 21-26) and other sacred festivals (Deuteronomy 12:6-7); since the Lord's Supper is the new (kainos) covenant, New Testament, counterpart to Passover; and since children are included in the covenant via their baptism, on what Biblical and theological basis can they be excluded now?*

If we appeal to the covenant as our Biblical and theological basis for infants receiving baptism, how can we not allow children to partake in the New Testament counterpart to these Old Testament feasts? Are we being Biblically and theologically inconsistent if we do not also allow these young members of the covenant to partake of the Lord's Supper? Consider the apostle Paul's linkage of the two sacraments:

- 1- "For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ." (1 Corinthians 10:1-4)
- 2- The separation of the two sacraments was given a shaky Biblical basis in the Reformation by an arguably misleading interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11:17-29. Here Calvin and others maintained that a person must examine him or herself before partaking of the elements, and since especially very young children cannot do such examination, they should not participate in the sacrament of Holy Communion.
  - a- However, employing the first axiom of the historic Protestant principles of interpretation (hermeneutics), examination of the context, to 1 Corinthians 11:17-29, we see that the command to examine oneself pertains primarily to the practice of the time of a considerable number of adult church members to become divisive and to demean and exclude other members of the body of Christ and thereby profane the sacrament. Paul is telling such members to examine themselves before partaking of the sacrament so they don't bring condemnation on themselves. To the extent we do so today, we also need to conduct such self-examination.
  - b- However, little children who have not engaged in such behavior would not have to do such reflective self-examination. Yet, they will when they become older if they engage in such actions against the body (the church), and as they reflect on their need to repent of other sins

they've committed. (Romans 3:23) It is to assist us in so doing that the logic of the liturgy in corporate Christian worship prescribes that the prayer of confession precedes the celebration of the Lord's Supper. In fact, it is important for us to quickly confess our sins as soon as possible upon entering the sanctuary and coming into the presence of God who is holy, holy, holy.

- c- To properly interpret this passage (indeed all passages of God's Word) we must consider the context. I urge that in so doing we need to not only reflect on the verses immediately preceding and following the one(s) at issue, but also the whole chapter, indeed the whole book, as well as other texts in the Bible.

In this case, review 1 Corinthians 10:1-4 in which Paul links the two sacraments in historical context, and the rest of the chapter where he undertakes this particular problem of divisiveness, that is an aspect of the whole matter of church divisions, which is one of the major themes and one of at least three main purposes he had in writing and that he is primarily addressing throughout 1 Corinthians. In this chapter Paul clearly relates the issue to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper (10:14-22). We'll look at this matter in further depth shortly.

- 3- Even though a strong, and I believe convincing, case can be made that 1 Corinthians 11:17-29 does not primarily apply to the subject of children at the Lord's Table, we can and should say more about the application of this text by many since the Reformation who use it as a proof-text to prohibit children at the Lord's Table. They overlook key Biblical and theological matters.

The first of these important matters involves the very nature and meaning of the sacraments. As my friend and former seminary faculty colleague, Lyle Bierma, Professor of Systematic Theology, writes with a firm grasp of sound Lutheran and Reformed doctrine,

a sacrament is first and foremost something God does, not something we do. Christ himself instituted baptism and the Lord's Supper, and in both sacraments it is God who acts and speaks. They are, as we say, means of grace—God's grace. There God reminds and assures the covenant community of his promises. But this gracious character of the sacraments is compromised when we exclude covenant children from the Lord's table. In the baptism of an infant, the covenant community is given a graphic demonstration of the promise of salvation by grace alone as the water of promise is applied to a tiny child—helpless, uncomprehending, and wholly incapable of any merit-

earning work. Why, then, must these same children “earn” their way to the table of promise? Why must they first pass a test of understanding and worthiness? That seems to run counter to the very message of grace that the sacraments proclaim. If the sacraments are for members of this community who are weak and in need of God’s grace, everyone—whether near the end of their Christian life or in the earliest stages—should feed around the table.<sup>4</sup>

When we practice this important part of worship with children included, we can expect the same opportunity to facilitate their spiritual growth and development that occurred in the OT times. Read again the Biblical basis of the Passover, the Old Covenant basis for the Lord’s Supper. (Exodus 12:1-28) Notice especially verses 26-27,

<sup>26</sup>And when your children ask you, ‘What does this ceremony mean to you?’ <sup>27</sup>then tell them, ‘It is the Passover sacrifice to the LORD, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians.’” Then the people bowed down and worshiped.

Children want to know. What a golden opportunity we have to facilitate their growth and development, their maturity in the Lord, if we will use it as the Lord has commanded. Don’t we long for opportunities when they are motivated to talk with our children about the most important matters of life and eternity? Educators call these opportunities “teachable moments.” Let’s not waste one of them!

- 4- What about the requirements Jesus and Paul stipulate pertaining to the celebration of the Lord’s Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:24-32 that we are to remember (v. 24), proclaim (v. 26), examine (v. 28), and recognize (v. 29), cognitive capabilities that infants have not yet developed? Bierma is again insightful:

Once again the parallel with infant baptism may be helpful. An infant at the baptismal font is not capable of such faith either. But we [in the tradition of Reformation theology] have always stressed the importance of communal, not individual, faith when we baptize our children. At the font God addresses the

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<sup>4</sup> Lyle Bierma, *Forum*, Spring 2007, p. 4. <https://internal.calvinseminary.edu/pubs/forum/07spring.pdf#page=5> (Accessed 2/2/16)



entire covenant community with his promises, and the faith of the parents and of the rest of the community “stands in” for the child by way of response [further symbolized and actualized by the godparents standing beside the parents and the infant]. Why not also at the communion table? The individual faith of the child can then develop in the midst of the experience of full fellowship with the believing community.<sup>5</sup>

3. These Biblical and theological truths are some of the reasons why the early church saw the sacraments as intimately connected. At this point we should observe that not only the “early church” as the believers and followers of Christ in the first few centuries were called, but the church throughout history so believed as well. When I say “throughout history,” I’m beginning with Abraham. The church did not begin at Pentecost; it began with the covenant God made with Abraham. The church is the visible manifestation of God’s covenant relationship with his people.
  - a. This reality is most easily seen by looking at the Greek translation of the Old Testament Hebrew, the *Septuagint*. The *Septuagint*, as mentioned above, is the Bible that Jesus, his disciples, and the early church used, which Jesus affirmed and said would last until all Scripture is fulfilled. (Matthew 5:18)
  - b. In the Septuagint the Greek word, ἐκκλησία *ekklēsia*, translated assembly and church in the New Testament, is used to translate the Hebrew word, קָהָל *qāhāl*, meaning assembly, congregation, and church some 100 times throughout the Old Testament. Thus, the word, *ekklēsia*, is used in the *Septuagint*, to refer to God’s covenant people whom he has called and set apart to be holy to him, his church, the primary means through which he is redeeming his creation in Christ Jesus. See, e.g., Deuteronomy 9:10; 18:16; Psalm 22:22; 26:12; 68:26; 149:1; Joel 2:16.
  - c. Another trustworthy friend and former faculty colleague, David Rylaarsdam, Professor of Historical Theology, observes that the church has historically understood the sacraments, though of course distinct, to be inextricably linked and is seen in the ancient liturgies of the church in the centuries following Christ’s earthly ministry. He writes as follows:

Ancient liturgies show that both baptism and communion were part of the ceremonies that marked a person’s entrance into the church. These ceremonies included baptism, a laying on of hands (later referred to as confirmation), and immediate participation in communion. From the day of one’s baptism, the Lord’s Supper was part of a person’s entrance into the church that was repeated throughout his or her life.

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<sup>5</sup> Lyle Bierma, *Forum*, Spring 2007, p. 4. <https://internal.calvinseminary.edu/pubs/forum/07spring.pdf#page=5> (Accessed 2/2/16)

Clear references to very young children participating in communion go back as far as the earliest arguments for infant baptism. The church father Cyprian (d. 258 A.D.) cited John 3:5 (“Unless a man be born again of water and the Spirit...”) and John 6:53 (“Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man...”), arguing that baptism and the Lord’s Supper were necessary for membership in the Christian community. For both sacraments, age was not important. The two sacraments were inseparable. To abandon the Lord’s Supper would be to abandon the community of Christ and therefore Christ himself.

Augustine also administered communion to infants immediately after their baptism. Infants participated by some accommodating means such as receiving in their mouths the priest’s little finger dipped in the wine. In his Easter sermons to the newly baptized, Augustine would cite 1 Corinthians 12:27 (“You are the body of Christ and individually members of it”) and 10:17 (“We who are many are one body, for we all partake of one bread”). Then he would point to the bread of the Lord’s Supper and tell the newly baptized that they who were now part of the body of Christ would receive the body of Christ in communion; Christ’s church body and sacramental body were united in the Supper. For Augustine, infants and the mentally impaired were the ideal subjects for the sacraments, for they imaged the helplessness of the human condition.<sup>6</sup>

- d. Rylaarsdam states that a number of references in Augustine (A.D. 354-430) and other trustworthy authors indicate that the participation in the Lord’s Supper was the practice of the church everywhere for the first thousand years. It has always been done in the Eastern church.
- e. However, there were several developments in the medieval Western branch of the church which contributed to a gradual split between baptism, laying on of hands (confirmation), and the Lord’s Supper. Rylaarsdam summarizes as follows:

First, in an effort to preserve the power of bishops, the Western church insisted on the principle “no bishop, no confirmation.” As Christianity spread, a bishop was not available in many regions to confirm a baptized infant. In outlying villages, it might be several years after a baptism before confirmation by a bishop was possible. A delay in confirmation often resulted in a delay in a child’s first communion. In contrast to the West, the Eastern church insisted on retaining the unity of the ceremonies which marked a person’s entrance into the church.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> David Rylaarsdam, *Forum*, Spring 2007, p. 5.  
<https://internal.calvinseminary.edu/pubs/forum/07spring.pdf#page=5> (Accessed 2/2/16)

<sup>7</sup> David Rylaarsdam, *Forum*, Spring 2007, p. 5.  
<https://internal.calvinseminary.edu/pubs/forum/07spring.pdf#page=5> (Accessed 2/3/16)

f. Other medieval ecclesiastical developments further separated the two sacraments and children's participation in the Lord's Supper.

- 1) The official proclamation early in the 13<sup>th</sup> century of the concept of transubstantiation of the elements in communion, occurred at the 12<sup>th</sup> Ecumenical Council. Later that century, the church made official the practice of not offering the cup to the laity due to the fear that if someone spilled some wine that had become the actual blood of Christ, that would profane the Lord's blood.

Renowned church historian, Williston Walker, adds that "Similar considerations led to the general abandonment by the Western Church, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, of the practice of infant communion, which had been universal, and which continues in the Greek Church to the present."<sup>8</sup> That development provided a theological basis for excluding children, as a result of the fear that if a child dropped some of the bread that had become the actual body of Christ that would profane the consecrated elements.

- 2) When the cup was taken away from adults that left infants with nothing, since the belief was that these youngest children would choke without the wine.
- 3) The theology of the Middle Ages developed a heavy emphasis on penitence, which excluded children with their limited cognitive ability to do so.
- 4) In this context of the necessity of penitence, the separation of the two sacraments was given a Biblical basis in the Reformation when 1 Corinthians 11:17-29, stipulating that a person must examine him or herself before partaking of the elements, was considered to ipso facto rule out the participation of especially very young children who cannot do such examination.
  - a) However, as we saw earlier, a closer look at the text in the light of the context, reveals that the command to examine oneself pertains to the practice of a considerable number of adults at the time in the Corinthian church to demean and exclude other members of the body of Christ, and to the commission of

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<sup>8</sup> At the 12<sup>th</sup> Ecumenical Council (4<sup>th</sup> Lateran Council) in 1215 A.D. the doctrine of transubstantiation was made official. This doctrine that had been emerging for a long time prior to its official proclamation, led to a lay movement to partake of the bread only, due to a fear of dishonoring the sacrament by misuse of the wine. This withdrawal of the cup from the laity was not imposed by the clergy. Since the cup was declared to be the actual blood of Christ (transubstantiation), they didn't want anyone to spill any of it and thus profane Jesus' blood. The 1281 Synod of Lambeth made the practice official that the laity may not receive the cup. Susan Lynn Peterson, *Timeline Charts of the Western Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), p. 105. Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, Rev. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959), pp. 239, 248. See also Rylaarsdam, pp. 5-6. For another trustworthy book on church history, see the excellent Web site of my friend and fellow church educator, James Found at <http://foundbytes.com/chhistmenus/>.

other sins (e.g., divisiveness and drunkenness), and in so doing, profane the sacrament.

- b) We should also keep in mind that the admonition in 1 Corinthians 11:28-29, about examining oneself and “discerning the body” (i.e., the body of Christ, the church, and any sins against the body one has committed, specifically divisiveness) before eating the bread and drinking of the cup, was not used in the early church or the Western church in the Middle Ages to bar little children from the Lord’s Table, as it is not in the Eastern church to this day. Is it not obvious the passage does not apply to them?

4. How, then, should we understand the key text of 1 Corinthians 11:17-34?

- a. 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 contains Paul’s directives (> παραγγέλλω *parangellō*, authoritative commands, 11:17), pertaining to correcting abuses of the Lord’s Supper. Those abuses included:

- 1) Divisions (σχίσματα *schismata*, 11:18) schisms, splits, dissention.

Paul cites this destructive and counterproductive (11:18) activity first, indicating its seriousness and reinforcing what he has been saying throughout the letter. The apostle calls this divisiveness unpraiseworthy and partaking in the sacrament as unworthy and a sin against the body and blood of the Lord. (11:27) Indeed, he says it cannot be called eating the Lord’s Supper. (11:20)

Significantly, Paul points out that a distinction needs to be made between divisions (σχίσματα *schismata*, 11:18) and differences (αἰρέσεις *ahireseis*, 11:19), the former being destructive and the latter being an indication of who pleases the Lord and who does not. (11:19) These differences constitute an application of the Biblical principle that God can bring good out of evil. (Genesis 50:20)

In a related sense, a contemporary application of this distinction between divisions and differences has been offered in the administration literature by management authority Peter Drucker, who observed that in an organization dissent is healthy, but bickering and feuds are not. Drucker advised that the former supply a source of valuable additional information, insight, and intellectual stimulation, but the latter undermine and can destroy an organization. Of course we know that the church, which is the body of the risen and reigning Lord Jesus Christ, will not be destroyed, even the gates of hell being unable to overcome it (Matthew 16:18), but such counterproductive activity that distracts and hinders the vital calling and work of God’s people has no place in the life and ministry of the church, and those who do so should repent before partaking of the Lord’s Supper.

- 2) Going ahead without waiting for others. (11:21)
- 3) Allowing some to go hungry. (11:21)

- 4) Becoming drunk. (11:21)
- 5) Humiliating those who have nothing. (11:22)
- 6) Paul indicates that these actions amount to despising the church (11:22) and in fact result in what they are doing not being worthy of being called eating the Lord's Supper. (11:20)

a) Look carefully at verses 27-29. In these verses we see a clear difference in the use of a key term, "the body of the Lord."

- 1- Verse 27 attributes guilt to the one(s) who eat the bread or drink the cup of the Lord in an unworthy, inappropriate, manner (*ἀναξίως anaxiōs*). Here Paul refers to the body and blood of the Lord, meaning the physical body of Christ.

The "unworthy manner" of eating and drinking has traditionally been interpreted as including the above practices but also, as indicated in the LC—MS paper cited above, by giving the elements to children who lack the cognitive ability to examine themselves.<sup>9</sup>

- 2- Verse 28 stipulates that a man (*ἄνθρωπος anthrōpos*), an adult not a child, must examine himself (or herself) before consuming the elements in holy communion. While not mentioned in this passage, children will need to do such examination as they mature and are concomitantly able and must do so for sins they have committed. Nevertheless, as they were not excluded from partaking in the Old Testament Passover and other holy feasts, and as they learned the meaning of the sacrament in conversations with their parents, grandparents, and others (e.g., Exodus 10:2; 12:24-28; Deuteronomy 6:20), so children in the New Testament learned as our children should today from their parents, grandparents, and other believers in and followers of the Lord.
- 3- The interpretation of verse 29 by many, if not most, has been to think of "the body of the Lord" as referring to the Christ whose body and blood are represented in the sacrament. But in the light of the context of the passage, this vertical perspective is not the only possible, and debatably not the most accurate, understanding and interpretation of the term "the body of the Lord."

A closer look indicates the likelihood of an important difference in the use of the word "body." Paul says, "For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on

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<sup>9</sup> Commission on Theology and Church Relations, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, "Knowing What We Seek and Why We Come: Questions and Answers Concerning the Communing of Infants and Young Children," September 13, 2014, pp. 4-6, 8.

himself.” In using the term, “recognizing (διακρίνων *diakrinōn*, discerning, distinguishing; a present active participle indicating an ongoing process of discerning) the body of the Lord,” Paul does not include a reference to the physical body and blood of Jesus, as he did in verse 27, which suggests a different meaning of the word body.

- a- As we read this verse in the light of the context of chapter eleven, our viewpoint shifts to a horizontal perspective. As another trustworthy and careful former colleague of mine, New Testament Professor Jeffrey Weima, explains, “if we examine the historical context of the Corinthians passage—namely, the specific problem that was taking place in the Corinthian church—we will have a different understanding of the key phrase “recognizing the body.”<sup>10</sup> In both the preceding chapter (10:17) and in the next chapter, Paul refers to the church, and specifically as the body of Christ in 12:27.
- b- Weima continues: “The church in Corinth, like other congregations well into the second century, celebrated the Lord’s Supper as part of a dinner or full meal. The whole church would first break bread at the beginning of the meal to remember Christ’s death, then they would eat their main course, and finally at the end of the meal they would drink wine also to remember Christ’s death (note 1 Cor. 11:25, “In the same way, *after supper*, he took the cup, saying...”). The problem was the main course that took place between these two acts of remembrance: the Corinthians were celebrating the Supper in a way that created divisions (v. 18). The guilty were the wealthy (“those who have homes”), whose conduct at these meals involved “despising the church of God and humiliating those who have nothing” (v. 22). In fact, things got so out of hand that poor church members left the worship services hungry while the rich members staggered home drunk (v. 21)!” This reality strongly suggests Paul is referring to the church when he asserts the requirement of “recognizing the body,” that is to not mistreat others, in particular the poor and disadvantaged, and meet the needs of their fellow members of the body of Christ.
- c- Implications of this horizontal perspective include the command being given to healthy normal adults who have the ability to do such examining and discerning as well as remembering and proclaiming the Word of God required in this text.

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<sup>10</sup> Jeffrey Weima, *Forum*, Spring 2007, p. 7. <https://internal.calvinseminary.edu/pubs/forum/07spring.pdf#page=5> (Accessed 2/4/16)

- 4- Do these commands apply to infants and little children who have not sinned in these ways? Where do we read that God requires us to repent over a sin we have not committed?
- Do we not see the basic underlying principle here and elsewhere in Scripture that more is expected of a person as he or she matures and is given more? (Cf., e.g., Luke 12:47-48)
- 5- While these commands do not now apply to infants and little children, they will as they become older and need to confess and repent as this and the other relevant Biblical passages stipulate. How do children learn the meaning of the sacrament and learn to do such remembering (v. 24), proclaiming (v. 26), examining (v. 28), and recognizing (v. 29)? The Word of God tells us throughout its revelation that this learning occurs daily in the home and regularly in the worship of the church. And surely it occurs in the participation of the sacrament. (E.g., Exodus 12:24-28; Deuteronomy 4:9-10; 6:4-9, 20-25; Joshua 4:4-7, 19-24; Nehemiah 8:1-3; Psalm 78:1-8; Acts 20:7-12; Ephesians 5:18-21; 6:4; Colossians 3:19, 21; 2 Timothy 1:5)

We must remember that development occurs over a long period of time. The sooner we can facilitate our children's and grandchildren's ongoing and regular engagement with the Word and sacraments together with the body of Christ and the operation of the Holy Spirit, we will be fostering the spiritual nurture that will most effectively enable them to mature in Christ. (Ephesians 4:11-16)

- b) Thus, Rylaarsdam observes that “what the early church joined together, the later medieval church gradually put asunder. Today, Protestants are returning to the practice of the early church.”<sup>11</sup>
- b. In this difference of opinion on the question of admission of young children to the Lord's Table, do we not have here at the very least an example of what the apostle Paul describes as “disputable matters” in Romans 14:1 ff.?
- 1) Disputable matters are opposing viewpoints held by true believers in and followers of the Lord Jesus Christ who differ in their interpretations and applications of Bible passages that do not pertain to the salvation of individuals or to God's clear commands. This position does not mean these disputable matters are unimportant; it just means that we need to be loving and gracious toward others who view such matters differently from us and to continue the conversation together as appropriate.

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<sup>11</sup> David Rylaarsdam, *Forum*, Spring 2007, p. 6.  
<https://internal.calvinseminary.edu/pubs/forum/07spring.pdf#page=5> (Accessed 2/3/16)

2) As I have written elsewhere, and as adapted to this question before us,

[a]s mentioned at the beginning of this essay, the subject of admission of little children to the Lord's Table is one where fine Christians disagree. It is therefore helpful to recall the Bible's teaching concerning such conflicting opinions that will be useful as we address this issue. Regarding doing something in an area that is "disputable," Romans 14 offers guidance. If someone believes it is wrong for him or her to do something, then for him or her, it is wrong. (Romans 14:14) For someone else who is "fully convinced" that it is Biblical to do something, even that same thing the other person believes is wrong, he or she does so to the Lord. (Romans 14:2, 5-6, 14) Neither should judge the other. Both are permissible unless someone's faith is in jeopardy by a believer acting in this manner.<sup>12</sup>

We affirm our unity with and love for those who disagree with us: we are one in Christ and, indeed, our Lord has commanded us to love them (see, e.g., John 13:34-35 and 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 where Paul defines that love as being patient, kind, not arrogant or boastful, etc.); we should neither disregard nor disparage them. That should also be true of them toward us in such issues. (Romans 14:3-4)

It is also helpful to recall Matthew 16:19 where we read that our Lord has given the church the authority to "announce guilt or innocence" on certain matters.<sup>13</sup> In Matthew 18:18, he teaches that these decisions will be sustained in heaven. Putting these latter texts together, we can understand why different groups and congregations within the church universal can hold opposing positions on "disputable" matters and still function in accord with God's will.

Much more could be and has been said on this important question. As I indicated above, these are some of the main reasons I am persuaded we can demonstrate not only that the Bible does not prohibit the admission of even small children to the Lord's Table but that doing so is more fitting with the major themes of God's Word and his will.<sup>14</sup>

5. The purpose of the foregoing has been to examine the Word of God as to his teaching about the sacraments pertaining to the question of admitting young children to the

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<sup>12</sup> As the *NIV Study Bible* makes clear in a comment on Romans 14:1, however, "Fellowship among Christians is not to be based on everyone's agreement on disputable questions. Christians do not agree on all matters pertaining to the Christian life, nor do they need to." Kenneth Barker, General Editor. *NIV Study Bible*. (Grand Rapids: The Zondervan Corporation, 1985), p. 1727.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1466.

<sup>14</sup> Edward D. Seely, "Does 1 Timothy 2:11-15 Prohibit the Ordination of Women to Church Office? Pp. 4-5 <http://www.fromacorntoak12.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Does-1-Timothy-2.11-15-Prohibit-Women-from-Ordination-to-Church-Office.pdf> (Accessed 2/3/16)



Lord's Table. That is the WHAT of the question. The next question that arises is HOW to implement the teaching of God's Word on this matter in the church, especially where a difference of opinion exists.

- a. The how question is most effectively undertaken by the leaders engaging in dialogue with the rest of the congregation. Elsewhere, I have addressed this subject and offered guidelines to facilitate the adoption of innovations and preserve harmony in the process.<sup>15</sup>
- b. In the light of the foregoing, let us continue the conversation in faith in and love for the Lord Jesus Christ, the triune God, and in our love of his people, to seek his will in how to restore to God's covenant children the Biblical fullness of the privilege of membership in his covenant, which includes participation at the Lord's Table as well as in receiving the sacrament of baptism even, and especially (due to Genesis 17:7, 12; Colossians 2:11-12), as infants and other young children.

Nevertheless, let us do so in love, including with all due patience (remembering one of the main Biblical words for which means longsuffering), being careful to avoid divisions in the body of Christ, as God has so strongly commanded in these very words of the apostle Paul. As we continue to reflect on this subject with each other in this manner, maybe we can one day approach the Lord's Table with all who are members of his covenant, including his smallest children. Between now and then, let us worthily in grateful remembrance of Jesus eat the bread and drink from the cup and "proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." (1 Corinthians 11:26)

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<sup>15</sup> Edward D. Seely, "Defusing Fear of Innovations: Facilitating Change in the Church," <http://www.fromacorntoak12.com/church-administration-5/> (Accessed 2/11/16)