

## Clarification of Public Profession of Faith for Covenant Children

### Report A

Synod 1991 appointed a study committee "to clarify the requirement of public profession of faith for admission to the Lord's Supper on the part of younger covenant children." According to the grounds stated by synod, this committee had a two-part mandate: (1) to resolve numerous practical difficulties (Ground 1) and (2) to clarify the requirement of public profession of faith (Ground 2). This clarification committee reported to Synod 1993, but because of procedural problems, the report was sent back to the committee. In its 1993 report the clarification committee could not reach a consensus with regard to Ground 2 (above) and so concerned itself only with the practical difficulties. The reconfigured committee now presents two reports. The following report (Report A) argues for an expression of personal faith as a prerequisite for participation in the Lord's Supper and, in Section II, proposes implementation procedures to resolve the practical difficulties raised by Synod 1991.

### I. Support for an expression of personal faith as a prerequisite for participation in the Lord's Supper

#### A. *Baptism*

Baptism is the sign and seal of initiation into the covenant of grace. We in the Reformed tradition understand that "God graciously includes our children in his covenant, and all his promises are for them as well as us" (Gen. 17:7; Acts 2:39). Although children are a part of Christ's church through baptism, we have not invited children to the covenant meal until they personally express their faith. This difference in practice is grounded in a difference between the two sacraments.

#### 1. The relationship between baptism and the Lord's Supper

Baptism and the Lord's Supper are both means of grace which visually proclaim our union with Christ in his death and resurrection. They are New Testament substitutes for the Old Testament rites of circumcision and Passover. The blood of the Old Testament rites has been replaced by the water, the bread, and the wine of the New Testament sacraments because they celebrate the finished work of Christ's redemption. The primary difference between the two New Testament sacraments is that baptism is administered once, as an initiatory rite into the covenant (like circumcision), whereas the Lord's Supper is administered more frequently (like Passover), to represent the sustaining and continual deepening of the covenant relationship.

An additional difference between baptism and the Lord's Supper lies in the degree of involvement of the recipient of the sacrament. The very nature of the Supper demands that communicants be physically active in their eating and drinking, whereas those receiving baptism are physically passive in the event. The invitation to "take and eat" (Matt. 26:26) implies the active initiative of personal faith. Therefore, whereas the sacrament of baptism for children is based upon the corporate faith of the community, partaking of the Lord's Supper demands an active response by the participant. This second difference between the sacraments is the reason why the Reformed community has not practiced paedocommunion. As Bavinck states,

Baptism is a sacrament of the new birth, wherein the individual is passive. The Lord's Supper is the sacrament of growth in fellowship with Christ, of the nurture of the spiritual life, and it assumes a conscious, active participation by those who receive it. (*Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* IV: 641-42. Kampen: Kok, 1911)

## 2. The relationship between baptism and profession of faith

The differences between the two sacraments become more apparent when we clarify the relationship between adult baptism and participation in the Lord's Supper. In the New Testament missionary situation, adult converts evidenced repentance and personal faith before participating in the Lord's Supper (Acts 2:38). In the case of the children of adult converts, a profession of faith is separated from baptism in time, but it is still expected—as an expression of personal appropriation of the covenant promises—before participation in the Lord's Supper. Therefore, baptism and profession of faith must be tied closely together. Just as baptism and a profession of personal faith are prerequisites for adult participation in the Lord's Supper, our baptized covenant children must give evidence of personal faith before they participate in the Lord's Supper. The CRC Form for Public Profession of Faith explains that the participants "will publicly accept and confirm what was sealed in their baptism." Thus, a profession of faith is necessary both in the case of baptized adults and baptized children before their participation in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is permitted.

### B. The Lord's Supper

Whereas baptism is the *initiatory* rite of the covenant, the Lord's Supper is the sacrament which nourishes the participant toward *maturity* of faith. The purpose of the sacrament is not to nourish *to* faith, but "to nourish and sustain those who are already born again and ingrafted into his family" as Belgic Confession Article 35 declares. If we said that being born again happens through the communal covenantal faith evident at baptism, then we would be teaching baptismal regeneration, which we have always vigorously denied. The Lord's Supper is given only to believers, those who have personally appropriated the promises given at baptism.

## 1. The relationship of the Passover to the Lord's Supper

It is often argued that because children participated in the Passover, they should likewise be welcomed to the Lord's table. However, the New Testament sacraments are not exactly parallel to the Old Testament rites of circumcision and Passover; instead, they fulfill the Old Testament rites.

The nature of the new covenant changes certain aspects of the Old Testament rites. Just as the Easter resurrection changes the sabbath day of worship from Saturday to Sunday, so the universalizing and internalizing of the new covenant alter who may participate in the sacraments. If children partake of the Lord's Supper simply because children participated in the Passover, then the church would also have to baptize only male infants, since they were the only participants in the Old Testament rite of circumcision. But because the new covenant universalizes the promises of the old covenant, the recipients of baptism are both male and female. The universalizing of the covenant also influences who may participate in the Lord's Supper. Whereas the Passover was a feast for God's people born into the Jewish family and nation, the Lord's Supper is for those reborn into the family of God among all nations.

The new covenant also implies an internalization of faith, whereby God's law is written on the hearts of his people (Jer. 31:31-34). Therefore, since the Lord's Supper is the sacrament of the new covenant (Luke 22:20), regeneration and a faith commitment of the heart are the necessary prerequisites. Just as the universalizing of the new covenant affects who in the covenant community may participate in baptism, so the internalizing of the new covenant affects who may participate in the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper, unlike the Jewish Passover, assumes the internalizing of faith on the part of the participant.

## 2. The interpretation of I Corinthians 11:17-34

The chief passage describing the practice of the Lord's Supper, I Corinthians 11:17-34, assumes that the communicant must have both personal faith to proclaim the death of Jesus (I Cor. 11:26) and a self-consciousness to discern the meaning of the sacrament (I Cor. 11:29) and to examine his or her spiritual readiness to participate (I Cor. 11:28).

Admittedly, the main concern of this passage is not whether children may participate at the table. Paul's concern is to warn the disobedient rather than the immature. However, as Berkouwer points out, "even though we fully acknowledge this special character of unworthy eating and drinking [namely the breaking up of the communion], it cannot be denied that this was just one form of unworthiness, and that others can also appear in the course of history" (*Sacraments*, 255-56). The general instructions given in the middle of this passage (I Cor. 11:23-29) can be applied to other situations of impious and irreverent participation such as might occur with the participation of very young children who do not understand the spiritual significance of the elements. As Bavinck says, "This requirement is set forth in an entirely general fashion, directed to all participants in the supper, and therefore, in the nature of the case, excludes children" (*Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* IV: 641-42. Kampen: Kok, 1911).

In John 6, the other major New Testament passage describing the nature of the Lord's Supper, participation in the body and blood of Christ (John 6:52-58) is similarly based upon coming to and believing in Jesus as the bread of life (John 6:35). Personal faith is presupposed. The eating of Christ's flesh and the drinking of his blood refer to the spiritual and mystical eating of faith.

### C. Profession of faith

The New Testament passages describing profession of faith call Christians to confess their faith before God (Rom. 10:9-10), the world (Matt. 10:32), and the church (I Tim. 6:12). Confessing one's faith before the church was certainly connected with baptism. Acts 8:37 indicates that a profession of faith from the Ethiopian eunuch was expected at his baptism. Such confessional statements and ancient hymns like I Timothy 3:16 and Philippians 2:6-11 are also thought by biblical scholars originally to have been tied to baptismal events. In the case of infant baptism, profession would occur later in time as an appropriation of the promises which God made at baptism. Profession of faith looks back to baptism and provides an occasion at which the baptized may express their covenantal response to God's grace and then be nourished by the Lord's Supper. This personal covenantal response is at the heart of profession of faith in the New Testament.

In the Christian Reformed Church we have come to associate profession of faith with both an appropriation of the covenantal promises and an acceptance of certain adult responsibilities. Those who see covenant status as the sole prerequisite for participation in the Lord's Supper contend that profession of faith is primarily an adult rite of passage which in our society would probably not occur until at least 18 years of age. Profession of faith would then emphasize a commitment to the nuances of the Reformed faith and a decision to be involved in the ministry of the church with one's time, talents, and treasures. The members of the committee signing this report judge that the primary association of profession of faith with a rite of passage to adulthood undermines the close ties between baptism and profession found in the New Testament. Presently the CRC has one ritual that must mean different things under different circumstances. The time has come to recognize that, in the faith development of children, two important decisions occur and that they are frequently separated in time. One is the appropriation through personal faith of God's covenant promises made at baptism. The other is a commitment to the ministry of the church and to the nuances of Reformed doctrine. This second commitment implies a rite of passage into adulthood, whereas the appropriation of the baptismal promises can happen at a much younger age. Therefore, we should commemorate the appropriation of the baptismal promises with a public profession of faith during a worship service and at the same time should encourage a later commitment to adult responsibilities through an interview with the church council at the conclusion of catechetical training.

Our creeds support personal faith as a prerequisite for coming to the table. Belgic Confession Article 35 states that the Lord's Supper was instituted "to nourish and sustain those who are already born again." The Heidelberg Catechism contends that the purpose of Holy Communion is "to nourish and refresh believers" (Q 77), who "accept with a believing heart the entire suffering and death of Christ" (A. 76). Likewise, in "Our World Belongs to God" we confess that "In the Supper our Lord offers the bread and cup to believers." Because of this consistent testimony of our creeds, Church Order Article 59-a reads, "Members by baptism shall be admitted to the Lord's Supper upon a public profession of Christ according to the Reformed creeds." This requirement began already in Article 61 of the Church Order of Dort, which stated that "no person be admitted to the Lord's Supper but those who make a profession of their faith."

The different requirements for baptism and the Lord's Supper are upheld by the broader Reformed creeds as well. The Westminster Larger Catechism (Q and A. 177) explains,

The sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper differ, in that baptism is to be administered but once, with water, to be a sign and seal of our regeneration and ingrafting into Christ, and that even to infants; whereas the Lord's Supper is to be administered often, in the elements of bread and wine, to represent and exhibit Christ as spiritual nourishment to the soul, and to confirm our continuance and growth in him, and that only to such as are of years and ability to examine themselves.

These statements follow the lead of John Calvin, who declared that God does not

hold forth the Supper for all to partake of, but only for those who are capable of discerning the body and blood of the Lord, by examining their own conscience, of proclaiming the Lord's death, and of considering its power.

(*Institutes* 4.16.30)

Calvin here asserts that the ancient custom of admitting children to the table "has deservedly fallen into disuse." Instead, he concludes that "a self-examination ought to come first, and it is vain to expect this of infants." Thus, a profession of faith must continue to be tied to participation in the Lord's Supper. In conclusion, the synodical decision of 1988 that "the Bible makes clear that participation in the Lord's Supper is the result of status in the covenant and also entails an act of faith on the part of those participating" should be upheld. Our theology has not changed. There are two requirements for participation in the Lord's Supper, namely, baptism, signifying covenantal status, and a profession of faith, signifying personal appropriation of the baptismal promises.

## II. Implementation procedures to resolve practical difficulties

The practical difficulties raised by Synod 1991 in Ground 2 can be categorized into four areas: (1) the evidence of faith in the life of the child, (2) an adequate procedure for assuring ourselves that faith is present, (3) concerns about nurturing and expressing a Reformed understanding of the faith, and (4) membership categories.

### A. Evidence of faith in the life of the participant

The following concerns were raised at Synod 1991:

- What should be expected as "evidence of faith" from a five-year-old, a seven-year-old, a ten-year-old?
- Does the statement "I love Jesus, and I believe that he died for me" give evidence of "discerning the body"? Does I Corinthians 11 require a more theological explanation of who Jesus is?
- Is a covenant child ever too young to take part in the Lord's Supper?

If personal faith is presupposed for admission to the Lord's Supper, what level of faith is necessary? Should a profession of simple love of God and trust in Jesus be enough, or is an articulate explanation in adult thought forms necessary? This question has to be answered before the list of other practical difficulties with respect to children at the Lord's Supper can be cleared up.

The professions of faith in the Bible are all quite simple and straight forward. Peter says to Jesus, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16). The Pauline confession indicating the presence of the Holy Spirit is "Jesus is Lord" (I Cor. 12:3). The profession of faith necessary to receive the promises of baptism in the early church is "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God," as indicated by the addition of Acts 8:37 to the early manuscripts. Therefore, a profession of faith that lays hold of Christ simply and sincerely is all that Scripture requires. Profession of faith is not necessarily connected with a rite of passage to adulthood. Neither does it require a fully developed cognitive understanding of Reformed theology.

From the references to profession of faith in the Bible, it appears that belief in one's heart and confession with one's mouth are of utmost importance, as in Romans 10:9-10. Likewise, repentance is necessary (Acts 2:38) as well as an acknowledgment of Christ before the church (I Tim. 6:12) and the world (Matt. 10:32). These same responses are necessary in adult baptisms, as evidenced in Acts 2:38. Therefore, what is necessary for profession of faith is the ability to appropriate the divine promises given at baptism. Profession of faith is, then, the receiving of the baptismal promises so that the recipient can confess that he or

she is born again. This certainly can be done at a much younger age than has been the tradition in the Christian Reformed Church. Although we would not want to specify any appropriate age for participation, we conclude that churches should allow participation also to those in elementary school and junior high as well as to those in high school or college, whom we already welcome to profession and communion. Certainly younger children can fulfill the requirements set forth in Question and Answer 81 of the Heidelberg Catechism that those who come to the Lord's table be displeased with their sin, trust that their sins are pardoned by the death of Christ, and desire more and more to strengthen their faith.

*B. An adequate procedure for assuring that faith is present*

Concerns were also voiced by Synod 1991 with respect to these matters:

- Appearing before council or the congregation is frightening to many younger members.
- Public profession of faith was required for coming to the table before the 1988 decision and after. There is a confusion in the churches. Has anything changed?

It is advantageous that the church have an effective method for assuring that faith is present, a method which is sensitive to the spiritual, emotional, and conceptual development of children. Therefore, the following procedure is recommended for children in elementary and junior high school.

Step 1: The child expresses interest in participating in the Lord's Supper to his/her parent(s) or perhaps to a church-school teacher or another faith mentor within the church.

Step 2: The parent(s) discusses with the child the meaning of the sacrament and assesses the motivation of the child for participating. Convinced that this inquiry arises from a genuine stirring of the Spirit in the heart of the child, the parent(s) contacts an elder and/or pastor.

Step 3: The elder and/or pastor meets with the child and parent(s) to hear the testimony of the child with respect to his/her faith and desire to participate in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. It is recommended that the child then participate in a short process of preparation for profession of faith taught by a pastor, elder, Sunday-school teacher, or potential faith mentor. This training will focus on the nature and meaning of the sacrament and on a basic explication of the Apostles' Creed. It will be carried out at the cognitive level appropriate to the child. When satisfied with the faith commitment of the child, the elder and/or pastor will recommend to the council that this child be admitted to the table of the Lord. If the elder or pastor is unable to make such a recommendation, he will provide clear counsel and advice to the child and parents on how to address the area(s) of concern. It may also be helpful to assign an adult faith mentor to nurture a child toward full adult responsibilities in the church after he/she is recommended for profession.

Step 4: The child will make a public profession of faith in a simple and appropriate manner during a regular worship service. Since baptism is commemorated during a worship service, the appropriation of the baptismal promises should also be celebrated during a public worship service. Furthermore, a regular worship setting offers an opportunity for the people of God to celebrate a child's first communion and to make public promises of support.

The trial form for the public profession of faith of children found in the *Agenda for Synod 1989* can meaningfully be used for children of all ages. However, each church has the freedom to determine the most contextually appropriate way by which a person can make his/her profession of faith. In any case, the church ceremony should be sensitive to the specific, concrete ways in which children think and function and should use music and language that are appropriate to children so that an atmosphere of joy and celebration is created. It may be helpful for the child to stand with his/her family during the profession so that God's covenant with the whole family is acknowledged.

*C. Concerns about nurturing and expressing a Reformed understanding of the faith*

The following concerns troubled some at Synod 1991:

- The traditional public profession of faith made at the age of discernment is no longer required. When does a full member commit him-/herself to the confessions of the church, to sharing faithfully in the life of the church, to the authority of the church?
- Peer pressure leads some younger members to profess their faith with little reflection.

We as a church are dedicated to training young people who are knowledgeable in their faith, nuanced in their doctrinal understanding, committed to the Reformed confessions, and dedicated to employing their gifts and resources in the ministry of the church. Therefore, in the process of continued faith development, children who have professed their faith at a young age need a procedure whereby they can make a commitment of adult responsibility. We recommend the following procedure to church councils as they supervise the educational ministry of the church.

Toward the conclusion of catechism instruction (grade 12), the church council will conduct an interview with all young adults who have made profession of faith at a younger age. Assuming the young adults' readiness to accept responsibility for the church's ministry and to assent to the doctrinal standards of the church, the church council (or a representative group) will examine their knowledge of the Reformed faith, their loyalty to the Christian Reformed Church and its confessions, and their commitment to the ministry of the church through their time, talents, and treasures. Upon acceptance by the church council, the catechumens will be welcomed into full participation in the organization of the church, including the right to vote and to be eligible for church office.

Their commitment to adult responsibility will then be communicated publicly to the church either from the pulpit or through the church bulletin. Because a commitment to these adult responsibilities is more of a pastoral or consistorial matter than a liturgical act, it is unnecessary to have a public profession of adult responsibility within a worship service.

Those who are 18 years of age or older when they make public profession of faith will affirm their trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord and make the adult commitments of church membership at the same time.

*D. Membership categories*

Synod 1991 was also concerned about categories of membership:

- The separation of public profession and acceptance of adult responsibilities leads to three classes of members: baptized members, confessing members without full rights, confessing members with full rights.
- Where do we record for membership a ten-year-old admitted to the table—under baptized or confessing members?

The way in which we as an organization keep record of membership should flow from the process of faith development in the lives of believers. Since we have distinguished three important times in the life of a covenant child—baptism, profession of faith in Jesus as Savior, and a commitment to adult responsibilities in the church—it is best for our record keeping to distinguish three types of membership: (1) baptized members, (2) communicant members (professing members), and (3) corporate members (voting members).

In the transfer of family membership papers, the children should be identified as either baptized or communicant members. With regard to determining denominational ministry shares, only corporate (voting) members should be counted when the amount for each church is set.

Although we distinguish these three events in a Christian's life, it is important to realize that there are multiple occasions for professing our faith (including such times as preparing for the Lord's Supper, transfer of membership, installation into church office, and communal recitation of the Apostles' Creed). However, our hope and prayer is that this specified procedure will allow younger children to experience the sustaining nourishment of the Lord's Supper as they develop into mature disciples of Jesus Christ. Jesus' words "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these" can certainly apply to coming to communion as well as to baptism.

### III. Recommendations

- That Dean Deppe and Robert C. De Vries be given the privilege of the floor when this report is being discussed.
- That churches be encouraged to implement the decision of Synod 1988 (Art. 72, C, 3, a, b, and c) by use of the four-step procedure outlined in this report (see II, B above).
- That the trial form of 1989 (printed below) be accepted as the form for public profession of faith by children.

Brothers and sisters in the Lord:

Today we are happy to celebrate God's grace in the lives of (names). When they were baptized they were welcomed into the covenant family of God. Now they want to join that family at the Lord's table. So today they will respond in faith to God's promises in baptism, tell us of their faith in the Lord Jesus, and commit themselves to grow in that faith.

#### The Questions

- Whom do you trust as your Savior and Lord?
  - I believe in Jesus Christ as my Savior and Lord.
- Do you know that you belong to the family of God through your baptism?
  - I do.
- Will you continue to learn more about God and his Word, and will you continue to serve him with your life and worship?
  - I will.

#### (Alternate Questions)

- Do you believe in Jesus as your savior?
  - Yes, I believe that God sent him to die for all my sins.
- What does your baptism mean to you?
  - That I am a member of God's family.
- Do you desire to grow in your faith in God and service to him?
  - Yes, by learning more about God's Word, worshiping God with his people, and serving God with my life.

- Congregation of Jesus Christ, will you welcome \_\_\_\_\_ at the table of the Lord and continue to support him/her/them with your prayers and help him/her/them grow by the example of your discipleship?
  - We will, God helping us.

The questions can also be stated in such a way that the child gives a memorized answer or gives the answer in his/her own words.

#### Examples:

I love Jesus who has paid for my sins on the cross.

I want Jesus to lead me and guide me.

I know that I belong to God's family through baptism.

I want to learn more about God and his Word and serve God with my life and worship.

#### Welcome

(names), because you have responded to your baptism by telling us of your personal faith in Jesus Christ, we now welcome you to join the family of God at the table of the Lord. Strengthened by this heavenly food and drink, we invite you to join with us on the journey of faith that brings us to the promised land of God's kingdom.

#### Prayer

Our covenant God, we thank you for leading (names), your children, to the faith they expressed today. May the fellowship of the Lord's table strengthen them in faith and service to you. Help them to continue to learn more about you through your Word and grow in faith and love with all your people. Bring us all, one day, to that great wedding feast, where, clothed in the white robes of Christ's righteousness, we will eat and drink with him in the heavenly kingdom forever. Amen.

#### Hymn

- That a commitment to the creeds of the Christian Reformed Church and the responsibilities of full membership in the local church be made through an interview with the church council when those children who have made an earlier profession of faith reach age 18.
- That membership in the Christian Reformed Church be counted in three categories:

1. Baptized members—persons who have been baptized but not admitted to the Lord's Supper.
2. Communicant members—persons who have been admitted to the Lord's Supper on the basis of a personal expression of their faith ("profession of faith") but who have not attained the legal age of 18.
3. Corporate members—persons who, having attained the age of 18, have committed themselves to the creeds of the church.

F. That Church Order Article 59-a be divided into two parts to reflect this change in membership categories:

*Article 59-a*

Members by baptism shall be admitted to the Lord's Supper upon a public profession of their faith in Christ with the use of the prescribed form(s). Their membership shall be designated as "communicant member." The names of those who are to be admitted to the Lord's Supper shall be announced to the congregation for approval at least one Sunday before the public profession of faith.

*Article 59-b*

Baptized and/or communicant members shall be admitted by the consistory to "corporate membership" with all its privileges and responsibilities at the age of 18 after they have given a testimony before the church council of their understanding of and agreement with the Reformed creeds.

G. That CRC Publications be encouraged to produce for the churches study materials containing the history, decisions, sample forms produced by the Worship Committee, and any other materials for children and adults which may provide congregations with guidance for implementing these decisions.

H. That the work of this committee be declared completed and the committee be discharged.

Committee to Study Clarification of Public Profession of Faith for Covenant Children  
Report A

William D. Buursma  
Dean Deppe, reporter  
Robert C. De Vries  
George Hettinger

**Clarification of Public Profession of Faith for Covenant Children**

**Report B**

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**I. Introduction**

As history shows (see Section II), there has been no unanimity in the Christian Reformed Church on the question of children participating in the Lord's Supper. The two reports submitted by the Committee to Study Clarification of Public Profession of Faith for Covenant Children reflect the divisions of the past. Even after spending much time listening to one another's arguments, the members of the committee were not persuaded to come with one report.

What we developed in our discussions was a respect for both positions and a realization that there is sufficient evidence on both sides of the discussion to ensure that the two positions will continue to be held even if synod would accept one position rather than the other. Consequently, the undersigned propose that synod allow room for both views to be practiced within the denomination, rather than choosing either Report A or Report B.

We acknowledge that this approach fosters the congregationalism that is growing in the denomination. We believe, however, that such a movement is not necessarily unhealthy, that it probably should be encouraged in a growing, diversified denomination, and that, if synod permits local option on this issue, synod can also give guidance and direction to the changes that result.

The issue of why or how covenant children participate in the Lord's Supper is not at the heart of what it means to be Reformed. In accordance with Acts 15, we urge, therefore, that the principle "In essentials unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity" be followed.

## II. History and mandate

The question of children at the Lord's Supper has been before the CRC for decision since 1984, when Classis Rocky Mountain asked for a study committee to determine whether covenant children should be allowed to participate in the Lord's Supper, on the grounds that its "classical study committee has set forth compelling theological arguments from our own framework of covenant theology for children being included in the Lord's Supper" (*Agenda for Synod 1984*, p. 424). Synod granted the request.

Synod 1986 received a majority report that reiterated the necessity of "a faith that discerns, remembers, and proclaims the body of Christ while partaking"; a minority report that urged that children beginning at the age of seven be encouraged to take part so that "the mustard seed" of faith can be nourished; and a minority report that asked synod to declare that "it is desirable for covenant children to begin partaking of the Lord's Supper at whatever age they begin to be part of the worship service" (*Agenda for Synod 1986*, pp. 346-70). Synod referred the report to the churches, augmented the membership of the committee, and asked it to return in two years.

Synod 1988 was faced with two reports. The majority report asked synod to declare (1) "that the churches are warranted in admitting the children of the covenant to participation in the Lord's Supper because of their inclusion in the Covenant of Grace and because of the covenantal promise they have of a saving union and communion with Christ" and (2) "that since participation in the Lord's Supper is an act of faith on the part of those communing, the consistory should admit to the Lord's Supper those covenant children who evidence both the capacity and the desire to remember and proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (*Agenda for Synod 1988*, pp. 286-87). Three members of the majority added an addendum stating their conviction "that the arguments of this report lead to the conclusion that the nourishing of faith, which is a function of the Lord's Supper, should be given and should be made available as soon as a child is a participating member of the worshiping covenant community, regardless of age or capacity" (*Agenda for Synod 1988*, p. 288). They view the majority report as "a greater improvement in the inclusion of children in the worship of the covenant community." The minority report of 1988 reiterated that the sole basis for

participating in the Lord's Supper is an individual profession of faith that discerns, remembers, and proclaims the body of Christ.

The reports differed on the basic question of the grounds for participation. The majority report stated two grounds—covenant status and the desire to remember and proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. The minority report said, "... it has become clear that the majority secured that majority only by incorporating into its report a fundamental contradiction on the critical theological issue in the study, whether youth are admitted to the Lord's Supper because of a demonstration of faith or simply because of their status in the covenant" (*Agenda for Synod 1988*, p. 289).

The advisory committee of Synod 1988 felt that neither study committee was theologically convincing in its efforts to ground participation in the Lord's Supper upon an expressed faith. The advisory committee then presented the formulation (stated as a ground) that synod adopted as its own: "The Bible makes it clear that participation in the Lord's Supper is a result of status in the covenant and also entails an act of faith on the part of those participating" (*Acts of Synod 1988*, p. 558).

Synod 1988, after stating that "the church is warranted in admitting to the Lord's Supper covenant children who give evidence of faith and are able to discern the body and remember and proclaim the death of Jesus," also declared that "the profession of faith of covenant children required for admission to the Lord's Supper is not necessarily an acceptance of adult responsibilities within a congregation" (*Acts of Synod 1988*, p. 560). For this reason synod urged that instruction of children who had professed their faith be continued and that children who had been admitted to the table upon profession of faith be granted adult responsibilities at age 18 or at the age permitted by the articles of incorporation of the local congregation.

Since synod still required a public profession of faith for participation in the Lord's Supper, it requested "the CRC Worship Committee to review the forms for public profession of faith in the light of these declarations concerning the public profession of covenant children" (*Acts of Synod 1988*, p. 560).

In 1989 the Worship Committee noted synod's desire that younger children than before participate at the table and that public profession of faith as the entrance requirement also be maintained (*Agenda for Synod 1989*, pp. 63-68). It then said, "It is clear that our present forms for public profession of faith assume a more mature, even adult understanding of the Christian faith and life than what is commonly found in children." The Worship Committee subsequently recommended that the present forms be retained "but supplemented with a new form and that our entire practice be thoroughly examined." It was the Worship Committee that drew the attention of synod to the fact that public profession of faith is *one* ritual that signifies at least *five* different milestones or processes and that there are, in addition, in the popular mind, at least *three* more associations with profession of faith (*Agenda for Synod 1989*, p. 64); for this reason the Worship Committee suggested that "the CRC practice of profession of faith needs some thorough reworking."

Synod 1989 decided to submit the report of the Worship Committee to the churches for study, to send out the proposed form for public profession of faith of children to the churches for trial and reaction, and to add three members from the 1988 study committee to the Worship Committee's task force to study the question of public profession of faith.

In 1991 the Worship Committee reported relatively few responses to the trial form and asked for more time for the churches to use it and to react and for the Worship Committee to continue its study (*Agenda for Synod 1991*, pp. 49-50). At the same synod there was an overture from Classis Alberta North asking "synod to clarify the requirement for public profession of faith by covenant children" by declaring that "the church should provide ways for covenant children to profess their faith consistent with their individual stages of physical, intellectual, emotional, and faith development, and the church should distinguish these professions of faith from a late-adolescent/adult reaffirmation of faith" (*Agenda for Synod 1991*, pp. 516-18).

Synod 1991 appointed the present Clarification Committee with the mandate "to clarify the requirement of public profession of faith for admission to the Lord's Supper on the part of younger covenant children" (*Acts of Synod 1991*, p. 785). Two grounds were given for this mandate: first, "the implementation of the 1988 decision . . . has confronted the churches with numerous practical difficulties" and, second, "the clarification of the requirement for public profession of faith by younger members raises significant theological issues concerning the basis of participation in the Lord's Supper (the covenant or personal confession, for instance), which neither this committee [the advisory committee of Synod 1991] nor synod is able to address properly at this time" (*Acts of Synod 1991*, p. 785).

The Clarification Committee submitted a report in 1993, in which it acknowledged that the contentious issue was the basis on which one may participate in the Lord's Supper—personal faith, covenant membership, or a combination of the two—and professed that "we cannot resolve the theological issue at this time" (*Agenda for Synod 1993*, p. 239). However, in line with Synod 1989's decision, the Clarification Committee proceeded with recommendations for guidelines that assume the necessity of some form of public individual profession of faith for all who would partake of the Lord's Supper.

At Synod 1993 there were two advisory-committee reports reflecting on the Clarification Committee report and recommendations. The majority of the advisory committee recommended that "Synod continue its practice of admitting persons to the Lord's Supper upon a public profession of faith according to the Reformed creeds" (*Acts of Synod 1993*, p. 552). The minority of the advisory committee saw "no reason why the profession of faith required for admission to the Lord's Supper and the profession of faith required for admission to adult responsibilities cannot be separated" (*Acts of Synod 1993*, p. 556). After much discussion, which did not give any direction, synod recommitted the matter of clarification to the Clarification Committee for another year. This year has become two years because there are only two months between one synod and the date that material has to be submitted for the following year's synod.

### III. Analysis

For ten years the CRC has been discussing the issue of covenant children participating in the Lord's Supper without coming to any resolution. Part of the problem, it seems to us, is that it is not clear what the issues are, what has been decided, and what has been changed. We want to clarify the issues, believing that this is part of our mandate and that this will be of great help to synod and the denomination.

#### A. The issues

##### 1. The basis for participation in the Lord's Supper

The debate has focused upon whether participation in the Lord's Supper should be based upon a personal, individual profession of faith (either according to the Reformed creeds or according to a more simplified version) or, in the case of small children incapable of such a confession, upon membership in the covenant, that is, upon the basis of the faith of the community.

The support for individual profession of faith by all participants is derived from an interpretation of I Corinthians 11, which demands remembering and proclaiming the death of Jesus and self-examination in connection with the Lord's Supper, and from the tradition of the Christian Reformed Church and all Reformed churches tracing their roots to Calvin.

The supporters of the "covenant" basis for participation interpret I Corinthians 11 in another way—covenantally; they point to our practice of infant baptism, which is based on a covenantal reading of texts; they refer to circumcision, the Passover, and infant baptism as all involving the faith of one person standing in for another as precedents for acknowledging the same in connection with the Lord's Supper; they point out how the understanding and practice of profession of faith have changed; and they point to the long tradition of paedocommunion in the church, a practice that predates the establishment of any Reformed tradition. The reason for appealing to the covenant and to the practice of infant baptism is to point out that participation in the grace of God is possible without individual, personal expression of faith: In the Passover, circumcision, and infant baptism, on the basis of the faith of the parents or the community, children from birth are initiated into the covenant of grace and become partakers of all its benefits, such as the meal of the Passover or the Lord's Supper.

Traditionally these two have been seen as either/or positions.

Rather than making a choice between what many saw as two contradictory theological grounds for participation—individual expression of faith and communal expression of faith—Synod 1988 said that both were grounds for participation, not that some persons come on the basis of the one and some on the basis of the other, but that these coexist as one ground. We believe that the subsequent confusion stems from this combination of what we see as two mutually exclusive grounds, though others apparently see no contradiction between these two grounds and see them as basically one. We note that historically they have been seen as two separate, contradictory grounds.

However, it is understandable that synod came to this conclusion because it is true to say that everyone who makes a profession of faith is by virtue of that profession a member of the covenant. In effect, everyone who comes to the table upon an individual profession of faith is a member of the covenant. But this explanation fails to address the theological question of the *basis* for participation in the Lord's Supper. Is the table of the Lord open to a person because that person professes his or her faith or because he or she by baptism has membership in the covenant and the communal faith that this implies?

##### 2. The nature of profession of faith

If the question of the basis for participation in the Lord's Supper is not resolved, any discussion about the nature of profession of faith will be somewhat confusing. The discussion is valid once it is clearly decided that an



individual profession of faith is the only entry to the table. It is then appropriate to talk about whether there ought to be various kinds of professions (possibly one before admission to the table and possibly another at the time of transition to corporate membership); whether profession is something that is ongoing; whether there are various times when it is appropriate to publicly state one's faith; whether the church wants to use forms; and, if it does, whether it wants many forms that are age and situation appropriate.

However, when the question of basis for participation is unresolved, the discussion in connection with profession of faith turns to topics like whether it was historically connected to communion; what its relationship is to confirmation and hence to baptism; whether it should be connected to a rite of passage; and whether a rite of passage ought to be connected to the Lord's table. In the past, even when study committees concluded that an individual profession of faith is not required for participation, they would still address the question of public profession of faith, trying to show that it ought not to be connected to the Lord's Supper.

### 3. The Lord's Supper and the Passover

There are many arguments that have been presented for and against a close relationship between the Lord's Supper and the Passover. It is readily granted that, at certain stages in Israel's history at least, children of all ages partook of the Passover meal; hence, so the argument runs, if the close connection between it and the Lord's Supper can be established, then the principle of children of all ages partaking of the Lord's Supper is also established. All are agreed that there is a relationship between the two religious rites. However, those who believe in an individualized profession of faith as a requirement for the Lord's Supper will seek to demonstrate that the two ceremonies are dissimilar in that Passover allows participation of children by virtue of their being members of the covenant, whereas the Lord's Supper does not do so, and they will argue their case by asserting the uniqueness of the new covenant in its demand for an individualized faith response to the death and resurrection of Jesus as a prerequisite for partaking of the Lord's Supper.

We think that the issue that needs to be addressed is the issue of *communal* faith. Too often the discussion about participation in the Lord's Supper loses sight of the communal aspect of faith and overemphasizes *individual* faith. In many instances and situations individuals share in the grace of God by virtue of the faith of the community. In circumcision, in the Passover, in baptism (and in the Lord's Supper, as some believe) some individuals share in the grace and blessings of the covenant apart from a profession of faith on their part. Is the Lord's Supper the exception? If so, why? Shouldn't the exclusion of children from the table be just as disturbing to Reformed people as exclusion of children from baptism would be?

In broad outline, these are the issues as they lie before us; it is the answers to these questions that continue to divide us.

#### B. Changes resulting from the decisions of Synod 1988

##### 1. Participation of younger children

The decision of Synod 1988 was made in the context of the question whether covenant children should be allowed to participate in the Lord's

Supper because there seemed to be warrant for allowing them to do so on the basis of their being members of the covenant. As Classis Rocky Mountain's overture said,

In summary, although the Scriptures do not expressly address the issue of paedocommunion, they do lean decidedly in its favor. They do so by (1) showing us that covenant children were sacramentally involved throughout Old Testament times, (2) indicating by their silence the greater probability of sacramental involvement by New Testament covenant children, and (3) clearly communicating the status of believing children and the children of believers from God's point of view (which alone can be the standard we adopt and practice).

(*Agenda for Synod 1984*, p. 420)

We believe that because of this context, Synod 1988 was heard to say that children should be allowed to participate in the Lord's Supper, in other words, that Classis Rocky Mountain had successfully built a case that there is indeed a covenant basis for children's participation in the Lord's Supper. Certainly some of the media reported that the CRC had decided to permit children to participate.

However, the actual decision is more restrictive than many people think. Synod's exact words were that "The church is warranted in admitting to the Lord's Supper covenant children who give evidence of faith and are able to discern the body and remember and proclaim the death of Jesus in celebrating the Lord's Supper" (*Acts of Synod 1988*, pp. 558-60). Synod did not institute the sweeping change that some thought it did.

In our opinion, Synod 1988's decision encouraged professions of faith on the part of younger children and their subsequent admission to the Lord's table, but what is allowed to take place after 1988 was already allowed before 1988. It was always possible in the CRC for covenant children who gave evidence of faith and were able to discern and proclaim to participate in the Lord's Supper. There was never an age limit in the CRC, and so, if a consistory deemed that a twelve- or fourteen-year-old or anyone, regardless of age, gave evidence of faith and was able to discern and proclaim, such an individual joined the church as a communicant member and sat at the Lord's table with the covenant community.

##### 2. Three kinds of membership

With more younger children than ever before making profession of faith, the denomination has a question regarding the membership status of these children. We now have some children who are baptized and some children (pre-18) who are baptized and may participate in the Lord's Supper, and we have adults who are baptized, participate in the Lord's Supper, and are corporate members of the church; but we have only two official membership categories—baptized and communicant.

Should we change to listing three categories of members—baptized, communicant, and corporate? We must have some change in membership categories if we insist upon the necessity of an individualized profession of faith in order to participate in the Lord's Supper.

If, however, children would be allowed to participate on the basis of the faith of the covenant community, we would then have baptized members—who have the right to participate in the Lord's Supper—and corporate members—who are baptized and have joined the church in a formal ceremony or rite of passage (which includes a profession of faith) at the age of 18.

### 3. The necessity for simpler forms

Synod 1988 asked the "CRC Worship Committee . . . to review the forms for public profession of faith in the light of these declarations concerning the public profession of covenant children." We say, with the majority of the advisory committee of Synod 1993, that it was always possible for members desiring participation in the Lord's Supper to give evidence of their faith "appropriate to their age, ability, and spiritual giftedness, as determined by the local consistory" (*Acts of Synod 1993*, p. 552). What we then need to decide is whether we want a multiplicity of forms to cover all age and ability levels. The majority of the advisory committee at Synod 1993 certainly had a desire to prevent extensive regulations and foresaw no end to the situations that might arise and require additional regulations. We sense that currently the mood in the denomination does not favor more forms or regulations and that a considerable number of consistories want the matter of how to satisfy themselves with regard to the faith of a candidate left to their discretion.

Simpler forms for profession of faith become unnecessary if we decide to allow children to participate in communion on the basis of the faith of the community. However, we would need to revise the present Form for Public Profession of Faith into a rite of passage ceremony and to separate profession of faith from permission to participate in the Lord's Supper if we would decide to open the Lord's Supper to all baptized members.

## IV. Our position

### A. Rationale

It can be argued that it goes beyond the mandate of the Clarification Committee to get into the substance of the issue, but Synod 1991 left room for that when its advisory committee said that the overture from Classis Alberta North raised the underlying theological question as to the basis for participation in the Lord's Supper; and we believe that we help to clarify the situation by assisting synod in giving a direct answer to the main question: On what basis do covenant children participate in the Lord's Supper? It is fruitless to clarify requirements for faith when there is a segment of the church that rejects those efforts because it believes in another basis for participation.

The two accepted bases for being allowed to participate in the Lord's Supper have been stated as membership in the covenant and individual profession of faith. The crucial question is this: Is an individual expression of faith required for participation in the Lord's Supper? Part of the church has said yes, and part has said no. Strong grounds are brought forward by the defenders of both positions. Those who say yes turn to I Corinthians 11, and those who say no talk about covenant membership. For whatever reasons, pastoral, political, or confessional, synod took the two positions and merged them into one, to the dismay and chagrin of some.

When a person who has professed faith partakes of the meal of the Lord's Supper, such a person does that as a member of the covenant. In such a case covenant membership and individual profession of faith belong together. However, as a church we confess that believers *and their children* are members of the covenant, yet we allow only some members of the covenant to participate in the Lord's Supper. Obviously, we do not officially hold that membership in the covenant is basis enough for participation in communion. Our practice says that only those members of the covenant who have "publicly professed their faith"

may participate. In most congregations there are more members of the covenant who do not participate than there are those who do. As a committee we judge that it is not legitimate, with these givens, for the church to say that covenant membership and public profession of faith are equally valid bases for a person's participation in the Lord's Supper. By our practice we send a different message: Membership in the covenant does not entitle one to participate; only public profession of a faith that discerns, remembers, and proclaims does so.

But the discussion is precisely on the question of whether membership in the covenant is a sufficient ground for participation. Hasn't synod already answered that by saying no? Not really. In light of the discussion in which we have been engaged as a denomination, what is needed if we as a church are to reject covenant membership as a sufficient ground for participation is a clear, unambiguous statement to that effect, e.g., "Participation in the Lord's Supper is by individual profession of faith only. [That those who profess their faith are by virtue of their faith members of the covenant is incidental to the matter.] Covenant membership alone does not entail the privilege of the table."

We believe that such a clear, unambiguous statement has not been made because there is too much evidence supporting the position that covenant membership *does* entail some rights regarding the table, just as it entailed certain rights in connection with circumcision, the Passover, and baptism. In these ceremonies, are benefits granted to individuals on the basis of their membership in the covenant, apart from individual faith? The obvious, uncontested answer to this question is yes.

The question that then needs to be answered is whether the benefits that result from being a member of the covenant can ever be experienced apart from faith. That they can be seems to be implied when it is argued that some persons (children) should be allowed to participate in communion solely on the basis of their membership in the covenant, without their having affirmed a personal faith. Those who argue this position, however, do not mean to disconnect faith and the Lord's Supper. They mean to argue that the Lord's Supper is open to all covenant members on the bases of their covenant membership and the communal faith. The covenant community is always a community of faith and always acts out of and in faith. That faith is first and foremost a communal faith; members of the covenant community are benefited immensely through faith, though not necessarily through their own individual faith. In circumcision, the Passover, baptism, and also in the Lord's Supper, participation is on the basis of being a member of the covenant community of faith—on the basis of *faith*, but not always or necessarily on the basis of individual faith.

In what follows we will try to lay the theological groundwork for the position that communal faith has great implications for the individual. We do not mean to say that individual faith is not called for or hoped for. We do mean to say that even without individual faith a member of the faith community participates in the grace of God and therefore should be allowed a place at the Lord's table.

### B. Theological considerations

#### 1. The nature of the sacraments

We must begin forming an understanding of the sacraments from events recorded in Scripture. Our quest is to see if from the nature of the events (particularly the Lord's Supper) as recorded in Scripture there is anything that can be learned about the participation of children apart from individual faith.

The New Testament practice of baptism cannot be understood correctly apart from its roots in circumcision and its connection with the covenant. The same can be said of the Lord's Supper, which has its roots in the Passover of the old covenant. There are similarities and differences between circumcision and baptism and between Passover and the Lord's Supper; not all elements of either Old Testament sign are carried through to the New Testament. But of particular interest, and applicable to our discussion, is the relationship of faith to these practices. It was this question of the role of faith that sharply separated the Reformers from the Roman Catholics and that lies at the bottom of our present discussion regarding the participation of children or infants at the table today. The Roman Catholics held that the sacraments are efficacious, or have effect, *ex opere operato*, i.e., by a power inherent in themselves, whereas the Reformers, Luther as well as Calvin, held that the benefits of the sacraments are contingent upon the exercise of personal faith.

However, as soon as this has been said, it becomes obvious that faith in Christ is either not required for the efficacy of the rites in all cases or that, if faith is required, it has to be supplied in certain instances by one person for another. The benefits of circumcision, the meal of the Passover, and the privileges of baptism, particularly as applied to households and to infants, are received apart from individual faith. It is only in connection with the Lord's Supper that part of the church of Christ has, since about the thirteenth century, excluded all or most of those incapable of an individual profession of faith. The exclusion is made largely on the basis of an understanding of I Corinthians 11 as it applies to the Lord's Supper. The fact that a large part of the Christian church does not read I Corinthians 11 this way now and didn't do so in the past ought to give us reason to look at the issue afresh.

## 2. The sacraments and faith

### a. Various alternatives

One of the primary theological questions in the church has been what it is that makes the sacrament effective in the life of the recipient. Several alternatives have been suggested:

- 1) The sacrament is efficacious in and of itself, by its very *nature*, *ex opere operato*, without that nature being further specified.
- 2) The sacrament is efficacious as a result of correct *administration or manipulation*, involving who does it, when, and by whose authority; in the words of consecration that the priest speaks, the elements are transformed and become efficacious for the participant apart from faith or understanding (the sacrament was administered in Latin at one time, a language that the majority of the participants could not understand).
- 3) The sacrament is efficacious only when it is received in *faith* (so for an unbeliever nothing takes place in the sacraments). It is the personal faith of the participant that applies the benefits of the death and resurrection of Jesus to the individual. In this view, personal understanding and faith, discernment of the body of Jesus, and knowing the meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus become vital.
- 4) The sacrament has no efficacy and is simply *memorial*. This view is attributed to Zwingli, although he expressed different thoughts as well.
- 5) The sacrament is effective because of all of these factors or because of two or more in combination.

### b. The Roman Catholic understanding

For the Roman Catholic Church the correct *manipulation* of the sacraments is important, but once the elements have been consecrated by the priest, the sacrament is seen as having efficacy in and of itself (*ex opere operato*). The faith of neither the priest nor the recipient is a factor. The method of the consecration (the right manipulation) gives efficacy to the sacrament. In the words of consecration spoken by the priest, the elements become the body and blood of Jesus, and the body and blood of Jesus are efficacious for the purpose of his coming. In Roman Catholic theology the mass is not only a consecration of the elements but also an act of consecration on the part of the participant. Going to mass is a good work, and it builds up merit. The more one goes, the more faithfully one participates, the more one's salvation is guaranteed.

### c. The Reformers

#### 1) Zwingli

Zwingli at one time saw no efficacy in the sacraments at all. They were memorials in the sense that they served only to remind us that at one time Jesus lived and died for a special purpose. However, at the Marburg Colloquy, Zwingli was willing to affirm a spiritual presence of Christ at the table.

#### 2) Luther

Luther continued to celebrate the mass for many years after the official beginning of the Reformation. It was not the issue for him that it was for Zwingli or that it was for Calvin later on. When Luther gave his attention to the mass, he taught that the elements are not transformed; rather, "he held that on the altar are real bread and wine, not merely 'the accidents,' as the Pope has said, and that in them are the 'real flesh and blood of Christ.' Yet he would allow Christians to hold either for transubstantiation or with him. His own view is usually called, somewhat inaccurately, consubstantiation" (Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity*. New York: Harper and Row, 1953, p. 712).

For Luther the important thing was that the mass be received in faith (so too with baptism). The sacraments had no effect if they were not received in faith. (In the case of baptism, he held that the infants were aided by the faith of those who brought them for baptism.) The mass is not a work through which we gain merit, but it is a gift of God to be received in faith and with thanksgiving. The sacraments were not seen by him as acts of consecration on the part of the participants; they are God's actions, which we receive.

Does the mass have efficacy in and of itself for Luther? The fact that Luther practiced the mass for years and that he did not insist on a rejection of transubstantiation would indicate that he saw some validity to this idea. But the efficacy of the sacrament would come for him from the faith of the participant rather than from the manipulation of the priest or from the inherent power of the sacrament. However, opponents of Luther's position believed that according to his view there is still something magical about the mass or the Lord's Supper, some efficacy that it has from the "real presence" of Christ.

Luther was willing to state at the Marburg Colloquy that the real efficacy comes from the faith of the participant. However, when the German Reformers present drew up a statement that they would be willing to live by, they declared that their view was "that Christ is truly present, that is, substantively, essentially, though not quantitatively, qualitatively, or locally" (Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*. Mentor Books. New York: New American Library, 1963, p. 249). The Swiss—Bucer, Oecolampadius, and Zwingli—rejected this statement as "not clearly safeguarding the spiritual character of the Lord's Supper, because they could not understand how something could be present but not locally present. Luther told them that geometrical conceptions cannot be used to describe the presence of God" (Bainton, pp. 249-50).

3) Calvin

As one of the second-generation Reformers, Calvin stepped into this controversy. Calvin rejected transubstantiation and, with Luther, held that the bread and wine remain in substance what they are and that they are not incidental properties. But Calvin also rejected Luther's idea that in the elements "are the real body and blood of Christ." Calvin opted for a *spiritual* presence of Jesus, and in the *Institutes* Calvin talks of *how* Jesus is present. Christ is in heaven, and we are to lift up our minds to him and his kingdom, but

this kingdom is neither bounded by location in space nor circumscribed by any limits. Thus Christ is not prevented from exerting his power wherever he pleases, in heaven and on earth. He shows his presence in power and strength, is always among his own people, and breathes his life upon them, and lives in them, sustaining them, strengthening, quickening, keeping them unharmed, as if he were present in the body. In short, he feeds his people with his own body, the communion of which he bestows upon them by the power of his Spirit. In this manner, the body and blood of Christ are shown to us in the sacrament.

(Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960, 4:1718, p. 1381)

d. The presence of Jesus

The essence of the issue seems to be the notion that any retention of the physical presence of Jesus in the elements lends some magical quality to the sacrament; it was this that the Swiss Reformers and Calvin wanted to avoid; they also wanted to guarantee the humanness of Jesus by the recognition that his physical body could not be everywhere present at the same time.

The "magical quality" is the thing that is feared by opponents of paedocommunion who believe that one of the desires for early participation in communion comes from the belief that the sacrament has some efficacy in and of itself apart from faith. In the *Kerkinformatie* (*Church Information*) of December 1976 (no. 65, p. 8) someone writes (our translation), "But one thing is clear: without faith it cannot be done. And that has its consequences. It entails, e.g., that suckling communion can be defended only on the basis of a magical conception of the Lord's Supper."

So the Calvinist branch of the Reformation has strongly emphasized the spiritual presence of Jesus Christ for the believer. But has it settled the question of the efficacy of the Lord's Supper with that emphasis?

We need to note that all Christians believe that it is the *presence of Jesus*

(whether through a change in the elements, a presence under and in the elements, or a spiritual presence behind the elements) that is the source of grace in the sacraments. The question that divides is how the presence of Christ comes to the table and flows from the table.

Is the *faith* either of the church or of the individual the key to the *presence of Christ*? Christ comes into the community of faith gathered in his name, and Christ comes when the table is prepared; so faith and correct manipulation or administration do play a role, but would we say that Christ is present because of our faith or because of the proper administration of the sacrament? Not really. That would tie Jesus down and exalt our power. Christ is present, we would say, because he sovereignly decides to be present. God's grace, not our works (faith and administration), stand in the forefront, although our works are not absent.

Faith is the channel by which the grace of God comes to and is received by the believer, but there is an efficacy or working or power attached to the sacraments apart from that faith; hence the warning about eating and drinking judgment upon oneself if the sacrament is not taken in faith. The sacraments are observed in the community of faith, but in the midst of that community there are hypocrites, unrepentant sinners, and unbelievers as well as the uninitiated and the non-members, and the sacrament has effect for them as well. When those who did not discern the body participated anyway, the consequence in Corinth was that some became weak and sick, and some even died (I Cor. 11:30). What gave the sacrament that power apart from true faith? An efficacy inherent in the Supper, as we shall show.

If one still maintains that individual faith is the key to efficacy, then what exactly is it that this faith does? Does faith add a dimension to the table and to the elements? Is it the faith of the individual only or of the individual and the community? What is the sacrament apart from faith? A memorial? A nice ceremony? Is there then a magical quality to faith so that it transforms something empty in and of itself into a meal that is a "holy sign and seal" for us to see? How is it possible that in the absence of discernment, in the absence of demonstrated faith, people get sick and die by partaking?

Does the efficacy perhaps come from the *presence of Christ*? After all, the spiritual presence is a real presence, is it not? Ridderbos quotes Schweizer to the effect that "spiritual" means that it is a food and drink "which comes directly from God's sphere and gives divine power" (Herman Ridderbos, *Paul*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975, p. 420).

Berkouwer, in *The Sacraments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969, p. 225), relates that Bavinck complained that the critics of Calvin's teaching regarding the spiritual presence of Jesus have understood this to mean "unreal" and "imaginary." Do we not, in effect, in our accepted understanding, look upon it in the same way that these critics do, viz., as an unreal, imaginary presence of Christ?

Christ is really present at the Supper, and *spiritual* does not mean present in our head or in our spirit or by our faith, but really and truly present, though in a sense apprehended only by our spirit and not by our physical senses of sight and hearing. The bond between bread and wine and body and blood does not rest

on the physical constitution of the elements of the Supper, but arises from the nature of the fellowship of the Supper as a sacrificial meal. Thereby the elements are the bread and cup of the Lord [emphasis ours], i.e., by virtue of his institution and the living relationship wherein Christ stands as the Lord of the table to his own.

(H. Ridderbos, *Paul*, p. 426)

A little later Ridderbos says,

We have to do here with the same thought that we have already met above in I Corinthians 10, that communion with the body and blood of the Lord means both that one enters into *Christ's holy sphere of life and power* (emphasis ours), and that, whoever therefore wishes to combine the table of the Lord with the table of demons may wonder whether he does not wish to defy the Lord and fancy himself stronger than he.

(*Paul*, p. 426)

Ridderbos places the emphasis on the power and life sphere of the table. That sphere is there because Jesus is present, just as at the demonic altars the demons are present (I Cor. 10:14-22). No doubt Jesus is present in the context of the faith of the community, but in that context an individual present without faith in Jesus will still be confronted by Jesus and will notice the consequences.

Berkouwer mentions that the charge of Lutherans and Roman Catholics against the Reformed teaching concerning the sacrament demonstrates a lack of "sacramental reality," in particular concerning the comforting and sanctifying presence of Jesus in holy communion (*The Sacraments*, p. 219). But he also goes on to show that for Calvin, no less than for Lutherans and Roman Catholics, the real bodily presence of Jesus was important and maintained. The understanding and explanation of it differ, but Christ is present.

All along the question has been this: What makes the sacrament efficacious? The response is *the presence of Jesus*. Jesus is present in the context of the faith of the community, but this faith is not the reason for the sacrament's efficacy even if the blessings of the table come only in the context of faith. Is Jesus present apart from individual faith? The answer to that is a very clear yes. Faith is essential in making the meal a meal of and with the Lord, both for the community and the individual, but it is the meal of the covenant community with its Lord. Within that covenant community there will be some who believe poorly, some who discern the body (both the church and the Lord) clearly, and some who don't; there will be those who pretend faith; there will be hypocrites; and there will be unbelievers. The clear message of I Corinthians 11 is that because of the character of the meal (it is the supper of the Lord), the Lord is present, and his presence works for grace and judgment on all who participate. It is faith that determines whether the sacrament is efficacious for grace or judgment, but faith does not determine whether the Lord will be present.

The invitation to partake is first to the community and then to the individual, not the other way around. Jesus responds to the faith of the community, and because he responds to the community, his presence also has implications for the nondiscerning. Only those who give evidence of not discerning the body should be encouraged to change their way or not to attend, but covenant children of all ages should attend and partake as

soon as they can, out of obedience to Jesus' desire (Matt. 19:14; Luke 22:19) and out of the recognition that the presence of Jesus nourishes as bread and wine do.

### 3. The covenant and the mediation of grace

Who are the members of the covenant? Believers and their children, or, *more inclusively*, believers and those who are in various ways connected with them. Children are, by birth to believing parents, brought within the covenant community, and the promises are to them as well as to the adults. When only one of the partners in a marriage is a Christian, God's grace is such that he looks upon the children of such a union as holy and even upon the unbelieving partner as holy (I Cor. 7:14; see also Article 17 of the Canons of Dort). When Abraham believed God and received the sign of the covenant, all the males in his household (at least 318 adult warriors, Gen. 14:14) received the same sign. In the case of the household baptisms in the New Testament, regardless of whether there are infants involved or not, the same principle applies; included in the covenant of grace are believers and those associated with them. The holiness of these "additions" does not come from being in the presence of a believer but from the Lord and his grace. From the time that children are born into a Christian family, "God graciously includes our children in his covenant, and all his promises are for them as well as us. Jesus himself embraced little children, and blessed them . . ." They are God's own children, and all God's children are to heed the obligation to eat and drink in remembrance of him and so to proclaim the death and resurrection of Jesus until he returns. A child does that as a child, and some adults who never become more than children do it in their way; teens do it in their way, and adults according to theirs. When the disciples wanted to forbid children to come to Jesus, he said that no one ought to stop those to whom the kingdom belongs (Luke 18:16). What is coming to the table but a coming to Jesus, who is really and truly at the table, and who is to forbid any child to come to Jesus?

### 4. Faith and I Corinthians 11

I Corinthians 11 is the definitive passage for an understanding of the place of infants and children at the Lord's table. It is understood among us to clearly teach the necessity of individual faith as the basis of participation. But that "clarity" may come as much from our assumptions and from the environment influencing the way we read the text as it does from the text or the context itself.

Bavinck tells us that the Council of Trent still defended the practice of children at the mass, condemning only the efforts that made it mandatory for children to participate (presumably for their salvation). After citing the reasons that one Reformed theologian gave for why children should participate, Bavinck proceeds to dismiss as invalid the central argument—that I Corinthians 11 was not intended as a universal demand upon every individual. He appeals to differences between circumcision and Passover without making those clear. In the matter of baptism and Lord's Supper, he simply states, "Baptism is the sacrament of rebirth, wherein the person is passive; the Lord's Supper is the sacrament of growing up in the community of Christ, of the nurture of the spiritual life, and presupposes conscious, active participation on the part of those receiving it" (Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* IV: 642. Kampen: Kok, 1911).

Does the Bible say that? And what exactly is being claimed here? We suspect that an individualistic interpretation of I Corinthians 11 lies behind such declarations and that someone's theology is intruding into the Scripture. Baptism is never passively received. It is administered in the context of active faith. Without faith there can be, or at least should be, no baptism. But the parents assist (Luther), or stand in for, the faith of the child and so supply the active faith. Certainly the children of believers, from the moment of birth or even of conception, are members of the community of Christ. They are holy, and we confess that if they die in infancy we are to consider them elect and saved (*Canons of Dort*, I. 17). They don't join the active faith community at some future time when they make public profession of faith; they *are* part of the faith community from birth and as such need the spiritual nurture provided for the faith community in the Lord's Supper.

If we would start from the point of view that children belong at the table, we would read the text differently, and so we need to recognize that often we draw conclusions and then seek to prove them from the Scriptures. Usually we can prove whatever we want.

As a committee we are asking that synod look at I Corinthians 11 in the light of covenant-communal theology, in the same way that we read the texts concerning baptism. We ask the delegates to look at the text with us and to note the questions we raise.

a. The text

- 1) Says that the eating and drinking *proclaim* the Lord's death.

Is such proclamation verbal and intellectual only, or can the proper presence at the table, such as that of an invited child of believers, also proclaim the death and life of Christ?

- 2) Talks about an *unworthy* manner of partaking.

Gluttony, greed, and pride certainly represent an unworthy manner of partaking; but is the eating and drinking of a covenant child unworthy participation, comparable to greed, gluttony, and pride?

- 3) Calls for *self-examination*.

It is generally believed among us that this implies a knowledge of the standards of community, of the meaning of the table, and of the death and resurrection of Jesus on the part of every participant and that anyone incapable of such self-examination is excluded from participation. Is it possible to see these words addressed to those who are capable of self-examination without intending to eliminate all those, e.g., the mentally challenged, the infants, and children, who are incapable of doing so?

- 4) Maintains the requirement to eat and drink with *discernment* of the body.

This, it is averred, requires a certain mental ability to know and understand standards and an ability to evaluate. Is it possible, as with self-examination, to see these words as addressed only to those of the covenant community who are capable of discernment, without intending to exclude others?

The net effect of the statements or requirements of I Corinthians 11, so runs the argument, is that personal faith in Jesus and an intellectual understanding of the meaning and significance of the death and

resurrection of Jesus are prerequisites for participation, and therefore infants are excluded, and children may not participate until they give evidence of faith expressed in a statement consistent with the Bible and the creeds and acceptable to the church.

b. Intended audience: the community

We think that the key to seeing the passage in a different light lies in asking ourselves whether the words are addressed to the *community* as a whole or to each *individual*. This is not playing with the text; it is calling upon our covenantal understanding, which influences the way we read the Bible.

Those who reject infant baptism read the biblical texts about baptism in a way that we, from our covenantal perspective, would label as individualistic or noncommunal. If we dispense with the covenant perspective, Acts 2:38 has to be read as a demand that each person wishing to be baptized *repent* and *believe* before baptism is permissible. Surely, no infants are capable of repenting and believing; if they are, we have no way of measuring or gauging or knowing it. When Paul calls baptism the "washing of regeneration" (Titus 3:5), an individualistic interpretation would conclude that every infant who is baptized is regenerated (either before baptism or in baptism doesn't really matter), and, if we cannot say this of infants, we ought to wait to baptize them until they are able to repent and declare their faith. An individualistic interpretation leads one to claim either that there were no infants in the households that were baptized in the New Testament or that, despite the silence of the texts in this regard, all those who were baptized made individual professions of faith. On the other hand, a communal or covenantal understanding allows for the possibility that in the household baptisms an Old Testament practice is being continued, namely, that the head of the household speaks for and acts on behalf of the household.

c. Faith required of the community

A covenantal understanding does not eliminate the necessity of faith; rather, it transfers the responsibility for faith to the community.

Faith is never not required; faith is a *prerequisite* for circumcision, the Passover, baptism, and the Lord's Supper. But the important question is Whose faith?

- 1) Faith and circumcision

Abraham believed and was circumcised by God, and on the same day he circumcised Ishmael (whose faith is not mentioned and later proves to be faulty) and all the males of his household (whose faith is not mentioned and not considered to be important to the issue). Sons and slaves belonged under Abraham's headship, and through the act of circumcision Abraham was brought by God into the covenant as were all the others—through Abraham's act but by God's design and intent (Gen. 17:22-27). Abraham's faith was the vehicle through which the others entered. Why were the others circumcised? Because of faith—Abraham's faith, no doubt, but faith nevertheless.

- 2) Faith and the Passover

The Passover is a celebration of the faith community. It obviously would not be celebrated if there were no knowledge of and faith in

God's deliverance from Egypt through signs and wonders. However, did every individual person believe this? Perhaps the first generation of adults did, but certainly even then there were children participating who did not understand or appreciate the significance of what they were doing. Yet they and the slaves brought with them were part of the faith community that was told to celebrate the Passover of the Lord. What was required to sit down and eat the Paschal lamb and meal? Faith. But the faith of parents covered for children, and the faith of the community covered for the slaves and foreigners among them.

3) Faith and baptism

We don't need to go to great lengths to show our covenantal understanding of baptism, but it is worth repeating that no one is baptized apart from faith—in the New Testament or in our denomination, which practices infant baptism. Faith is an absolute requirement for baptism. The way we differ from those who reject infant baptism is not that they base baptism upon faith and we base it upon membership in the covenant; the difference is that they emphasize individual faith before baptism, whereas we emphasize communal-covenantal faith. In the instance of infant baptism, the parents represent the community and testify of their faith, on the basis of which the children are part of the covenant family of God and thus ought to be baptized. As Ishmael and Isaac and the men in Abraham's household were circumcised on the basis of faith (the faith of Abraham), so our infants and those who come into the charge or responsibility of the believer (adopted children, servants?) are baptized on the basis of faith (the faith of the parents).

4) Faith and the Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper is no different from the other ceremonies. It requires faith. Individual faith is not one ground for participation and covenant membership another; the only requirement or necessity for participation is faith. However, it is precisely at this point that some begin arguing from an individualistic perspective and say that in the Lord's Supper, and only here, individual faith is required and that the faith of the parents or the faith of the community covers no one.

This stance is highly inconsistent. Only this ceremonial rite is excluded from the claim that we make concerning the others, namely, that the faith of the community can stand in for the individual.

It is claimed by some that we take this stance because the Bible demands it. But that is a circular argument. If one starts with the presupposition that individual faith is required before baptism, one approaches the individual texts from that perspective and ends up proving what one believed in the first place. However, suppose one assumed that faith relates to the Lord's Supper in the same way as it does to the other ceremonies, namely, that the community can stand in for the individual in certain situations. Would one then be able to hear I Corinthians II supporting this? In other words, what if we read and heard I Corinthians II covenantally or communally—as we do in the instance of baptism—rather than individualistically?

d. A covenantal hearing of I Corinthians II

1) Proclaiming

In Corinth it was the whole community that proclaimed the Lord's death by its eating and drinking, and it was that same community that was proclaiming by its actions that it saw no implications for communal behavior in the death of Jesus. Undoubtedly, Corinth contained people who were doing it right even in the midst of abuse. But the overall practice was a bad one. Paul is saying in effect, "People, you are not proclaiming the Lord's death as a community even though there may be among you those who understand and do so correctly." The church or the community must proclaim the Lord's death, but this does not mean that every individual must understand precisely what is involved in proclaiming in order to participate. *Proclaim* in this instance is to be understood no differently from *repent* in connection with baptism—absolutely necessary but required first of all of the community and then of the individuals within it. In both the Passover and the Lord's Supper, the children will learn, through their participation and the instruction of the parents and/or the community, what the Passover and the death mean. They are not to be kept away from the table until they have the correct understanding, any more than they are excluded from the daily table until they have learned proper manners.

Baptism, no less than the Lord's Supper, proclaims the Lord's death, and all who are baptized, young and old, are held responsible for the fact of their participation in the sacraments. In both sacraments the grace of God is received by faith for faith, and in neither instance is the emphasis on the recipients' actions. Our actions in being baptized and in eating and drinking proclaim the Lord's death and point to what he has done.

Much is made of the supposition that infants can only be passive in regard to the table, as they are in baptism, though the demand is for an active faith. This remains a problem only in the context of an individualistic interpretation and understanding of what takes place. In both sacraments faith is active, but in baptism, as Luther said, the faith of the children is aided by the parents' faith or, more aptly put, supplied by the parents. We argue the same thing for children participating in the Lord's Supper.

2) Worthy participation

Eating and drinking in a worthy manner obviously require a belief in what Jesus accomplished for the individual and for the community. It precludes partaking in a selfish, gluttonous, greedy, jealous, or proud way, which would profane his death and resurrection. The question pertinent to this discussion is whether children are capable of partaking of the Lord's Supper in a worthy way. Since I Corinthians II does not exclude them from the requirement of *worthy* participation, we conclude that they *may* participate if they do so in such a way that Jesus and the members of the body are honored, served, and respected. It is part of the responsibility of parents to be teaching their covenant children as they participate in communion what it is the Lord desires from those who come to the table.

It is the faith of the parents and the community that brings children

to the table; there they are continually faced with the call to believe for themselves. Children should not be kept from the table until they prove that they have a faith worthy of it, just as they are not kept from family meals until they learn what those meals signify and how they are supposed to respond. Children learn a "worthy manner" by participating in the communal rites.

It can be argued that one can profane the table only if one knows what is right and deliberately does what is wrong. If so, the wrongs that children do out of their lack of knowledge surely cannot be considered profane.

3) The need to discern

Is the requirement to discern the body laid upon each individual? To answer yes is to accept the individualistic interpretation of I Corinthians 11. But it is entirely possible that this requirement is laid upon the community and that discernment must be taught to the children as they are participating. This text does not require us to exclude from the table those who can not yet discern the body. If it did, certain persons, e.g., the mentally challenged, would be forever banned from the table.

4) The need for self-examination

The argument with respect to self-examination is that, since infants are incapable of such, though sinful as part of the human race, it is inevitable that small children or infants will participate in an unworthy manner and so will eat and drink judgment upon themselves. It is true, of course, that small children can't look at themselves critically and that they are sinful, but we do not believe that it is warranted to draw the conclusion that therefore they will eat unworthily and to their own judgment. There are two reasons for rejecting this conclusion. First, it ignores a covenantal reading of the text and so makes the assumption that all the words of Paul are to be applied individually and that any individual incapable of self-examination is to be excluded. Second, it does not take into account the fact that the words of self-examination in the text are intended to be heeded by both men and women even though they are addressed to the man. The mention of the man does not exclude the woman, nor does the mention of self-examination on the part of those capable of it exclude those who by circumstance of age or mental challenge cannot self-examine. How do we know that these words are addressed also to women and that really the text means that all people must examine themselves? From a covenantal, contextual understanding of the passage. Children participate on the basis of their parents' or the community's faith and hence self-examination.

If we read I Corinthians 11 in the same way that we read the Bible passages about circumcision, Passover, and baptism, nothing leads us to exclude children of any age. Only an individualistic interpretation based upon an individualistic understanding and interpretation of I Corinthians 11 leads some to demand individual faith for admission to the table and excludes those not able to give such a statement.

5) The Lord's Supper and the Passover

Much has been written regarding the relationship between the Lord's Supper and the Passover. Those who would include everyone of

the faith community at the table point out that all ages sat down at the Passover meal; hence all in the New Testament covenant community ought also to participate in the Lord's Supper. Those who wish to limit participation only to those who can express their individual faith attempt to show that not all the parts of the Passover carry over to the Lord's table. This interpretation asserts that an almost totally new covenant was instituted in the Lord's Supper and that one of the features of the new covenant is that the right of participation is based upon individual faith.

This discussion is not germane to the argument being presented in this report. What is the same in all covenants of both the Old and New Testaments is that, despite the changes, God deals *covenantally* with his people. Examples of God's dealing communally/covenantally with people in the new covenant, of which we too are a part, are the household baptisms, the imputed holiness of unbelieving spouses and of children of mixed Christian-non-Christian marriages, the way the new humanity is in Christ as the old humanity was in Adam, and the sickliness and even death of people in Corinth because of improper observance of the communion meal.

6) The established tradition

The tradition of which we are a part clearly maintains the necessity of an individual faith for participation in the Lord's Supper. However, it is not the only tradition, and, in fact, our tradition has been extant in the church for a far shorter period of time than the other. In addition, there are many Christians today who practice the tradition that has been in the church from the beginning, the practice of allowing children of all ages to participate in the Lord's Supper. We say this to create room for a new look at the question.

In addition, the CRC is part of a Reformed heritage that prides itself on being always reforming. We believe that we read the Bible in the context of our times, and we believe in listening to the Holy Spirit. The result is that there are some things believed now that were not believed by Calvin and Luther and vice-versa; and we do not think this is bad. We acknowledge that part of being a Reformed church is *semper reformanda* ("always reforming"). We have the right, the responsibility, and the precedents to differ with those who have gone before us. All of these factors plead for a reexamination of the issue of children at the table.

a) A primary focus on soteriology in the sixteenth century

The state of the church in the sixteenth century determined in many ways what was emphasized and what was passed over or scarcely mentioned. We generally agree that the primary issue of the Reformation was soteriology, how one is saved. Ecclesiology received comparatively little attention. Missions were not the concern then that they have become in later years. It was not so much that the issues that received little attention were not considered important; rather, the pressure of the moment demanded response, and the question of salvation was most urgent. Authentic community is probably the primary issue today. What is primary in



an age influences the discussion, the practice, and the exegesis of Scripture in that age.

b) A sacramentalist church

The late medieval church had become a sacramentalist church, where merit was built up by manipulating and attending the sacraments. They, in and of themselves, were means of grace to the participants, and individual faith was not required for participation in them. There was no word to which assent could be given; there was no demand to believe in Jesus, at least not one that the people could understand. The Bible was in the hands of only a few, so only a few could know God or his will directly. People were asked to trust "mother church," who would look after their welfare. Against this the Reformers rightly posited the thesis of individual responsibility for faith. This meant that people had to hear and understand the gospel claim and respond individually to it. The climate was hardly right for discussion of the role of communal faith in the Lord's Supper. In the thought of the Reformers such an idea would have been reminiscent of the papal church, and so faith individually expressed was maintained as the prerequisite for attendance at the table.

The same requirement of individual faith was not maintained by all the Reformers with respect to baptism when issues of the state intruded themselves upon the church. There was, however, a segment of the church which, being consistent with the position of individual faith demanded by the Reformation, rejected infant baptism and held out for believers' baptism on the grounds that baptism also requires individual expression of faith. In places where citizenship in the state was synonymous with membership in the church, whether Roman Catholic, Lutheran, or Calvinist, the Anabaptists condemned this practice as unbiblical and refused to baptize infants and anyone who did not evidence individual faith. This close relationship of church and state continues in some places until today; it was not challenged in the Netherlands until 1834.

Our thrust is that at the time of the Reformation the issue of baptism did not receive all the attention that it deserved. We look at the question of state and church and baptism much differently today than the Reformers did, as is evident from the changes brought into Article 36 of the Belgic Confession.

In context, what the Reformers said made sense; yet it would have been better for all if they had listened to one another at the time and had sought together to hear more clearly what the Bible was saying.

c) Individualism and community

Today the climate is one of rampant individualism, at least in the Western world, and the concept of community is weak among us. For this reason there is interest in a new communal-covenantal look at the question of the Lord's Supper. We have established that faith is important to participation in the Supper. Having said that, we now look more closely at the role of communal faith with regard to holy communion.

d) The effect of the early mystery religions

The Reformers, laboring in the context of sacramentalism and believing the bread and wine to be the body and blood of the Lord, feared that the body and blood would be profaned if children or adults dropped or spilled it. Infrequent celebration was the rule rather than the exception in both Roman Catholic and Protestant practice, probably because it was reasonable to think that if they did not celebrate, they could not profane, just as in the Old Testament people did not use Yahweh's name so that they would never be guilty of misusing it. Calvin, who desired weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper, faced constant opposition on that issue.

There is great concern and care taken with the consecrated host in the Roman Catholic Church. It is the body of Christ and may be kept only in certain places under certain conditions and may be accessible only to certain people. The mass has always been a solemn, serious, awe-inspiring, and, in some ways, dreaded celebration. That attitude is reflected in the awe and reverence (and sometimes fear) with which some people in the Reformed tradition participate in the Lord's Supper. Dressing in one's best clothes, infrequent celebration, preparatory and applicatory sermons, checking attendance, fencing in the table—all are examples of the awe in which the ceremony was and is held.

Certainly what underlies a large part of this attitude about the Lord's Supper is the influence of the mysterious nature of sacrament that developed in part under the influence of pagan mystery religions. We would be hard pressed to support many of these practices biblically. When Christ was among us, it was quite appropriate to be familiar with him, to touch him and deal with him on a human-to-human level. The ceremony we now call a mystery and a sacrament was a communal meal, the breaking of bread with one another, the Lord's Supper—ordinary, simple, familiar.

7) The nature of profession of faith

a) The history

The ceremony that has come to be known as "confirmation" originally began as the second half of the church's baptismal rite. It was the act of "confirming" the Christian identity of the person received into the fellowship; it was done by way of a bishop's prayer pronounced with extended hands over the individual. Only the church, not private individuals, could confirm the validity of baptism in Roman and African expressions of Christianity. Since local leaders were allowed to baptize but a bishop was required for confirmation, this latter act tended to become detached from baptism in both practice and meaning, as a bishop's services were not always immediately available.

Once the two rites were separated in the West (this separation never occurred in the Eastern church), the significance of confirmation began to change. It became an act in which the individual confirmed his or her *own* place in the membership of the church. It took place after certain criteria were met (usually a time of focused

training in doctrine). A bishop's official consecration of the confirmation was still required, but the rite shifted from being a baptismal reception into the fellowship of the church to being a confirmation of individual worthiness for membership participation.

Of course, the shift elicited a new theological debate: At what age should a person be confirmed? Certainly babies were too young to make conscious decisions about voluntary association with the church. In the thirteenth century, the English Archbishop Peckham first regulated the matter by officially requiring confirmation for admittance to holy communion. Until then, working from residual ideas of what confirmation had once meant, other English and continental councils had mandated that children be confirmed by the age of two. When Archbishop Peckham made confirmation the prerequisite for holy communion, the debate shifted to when a person passes from childhood to "years of discretion." No age younger than seven seemed to fit the circumstances, and the Council of Trent (1566) pushed in the direction of twelve as the ideal.

The Reformers viewed confirmation as "idle ceremony" and dispensed with it altogether as a sacrament. However, the idea of a public rite of passage to celebrate the movement of covenant children from participation in the church under the umbrella of family life to participation on the basis of maturing expressions of personal faith received wide support. Controversies with the Anabaptists added momentum, and eventually Reformed churches began to require knowledgeable devotion in addition to infant baptism as prerequisites for partaking of the Lord's Supper.

So began the present practice of *public profession of faith* in the Reformed denominations. Reformed and Presbyterian groups splintering off from other groups took with them the practice of confirmation as the rite of admittance to holy communion and continued to practice it under the name "public profession of faith."

#### b) Problems

Several problems remain, however. First, the historic theology of the church said that baptism was the entry rite into Christian fellowship and was all that was needed to share in the Lord's Supper meal. Modern confirmation was an illegitimate child born during the late Middle Ages, creating new terms for admittance to holy communion as well as to church membership.

Second, the only theological argument for denying baptized children a place at the Lord's table rests on an interpretation of I Corinthians 11:27-30. If the "examination" therein required in order to "recognize" the body before participating in holy communion is a rational understanding of the atonement, then children are not likely to meet the requirement. However, if, as most contemporary exegesis points out, "recognizing the body" means understanding the unity of the church as community of Christ, then it is precisely *when* baptized children *participate* in the Lord's Supper that such community is experienced.

Third, requiring an intellectually mature testimony of faith as the prerequisite for communion denies participation to those who

are unable to make such assent, including those who are mentally challenged. Thus, the "table of Christian unity" becomes the table of division even *within* the faith community, something not likely to be Christ's own design.

Fourth, recent attempts to urge younger public professions of faith subvert the inherent "rite of passage" intentions of the Reformers. Whereas Anabaptists urged the delay of baptism until persons could make adult statements of personal faith and could support those statements with adult life-style commitments, the Reformers saw public profession of faith as a more proper rite to highlight the changing personal involvement of the individual in the church's fellowship *without* denying the previous sovereign act of God in including children of believers in the Covenant of Grace prior to their personal acknowledgment of faith.

#### c) Conclusion

Thus, as the early church affirmed and as most of the church has practiced throughout the majority of its existence, baptism—dependent upon the grace of God and the faith of parents—should be the only prerequisite for children to participate in the sacrament of communion. To require a public profession of faith from one who has been baptized is, in effect, to question or deny the faith (of the parents) that led to the baptism. Public profession of faith, as the Reformers taught, is a legitimate expression of a younger church member's passage by rite into adult involvement in the church's corporate structure and witness. Public profession of faith should happen at roughly the same age as most similar expressions of transition happen in society (i.e., when people are choosing their places of residence apart from the parental home, their course of study for personal professional development, their marriage partners, and their careers). The criteria of evaluation for the public-profession-of-faith rite of passage should be (1) a basic understanding of the church's teachings (at minimum an understanding of the articles of the Apostles' Creed), (2) the ability to give personal expression of Christian faith, and (3) enough maturity to maintain the commitments involved in a relationship with God on an individual level.

In other words, the historic practices of the church suggest that baptized children should participate in the sacrament of communion and that the intentions of the Reformers are best preserved by understanding public profession of faith as a rite of passage marking the transition between adolescence and the adult responsibilities of faith in the church community. Baptized children belong at the table; public profession of faith usually ought to take place at the age of normal social transitions into adulthood.

#### 8) Church membership

When does a person become a member of the church? Reformed Christians believe that the church consists of believers and their children. These children are no less members of the church than their parents or other adults are. Our traditional categorizing of members into baptized and communicant is not very helpful except to tell us

who partake of communion. According to popular perception, one does not become a full member of the church until one makes public profession of faith and thereby is admitted to the table. If only the professing members are "full" members, are the rest "partial" members? Theologically we would say that one is a member or one is not a member and that the members of the church are believers and their children, in other words, all those who have been baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

If we continue the old division of baptized and communicant members, intending to say thereby that the communicant member has privileges and responsibilities that the baptized member does not have, we run into a real problem when twelve-year-olds become communicant members. They are certainly not ready to assume adult responsibilities. Hence, the pressure is created for a three-tiered membership: baptized, communicant, and corporate (or some such designation).

Since all three classifications of persons are members of the church and what we are trying to distinguish is mature, adult corporate members from immature, young nonvoting members, we would be better served to approach the issue from that perspective. If our question is how many members the church has, the answer is as many as have been baptized. If our question is how many have assumed adult responsibilities, we can list all of those who have passed through a rite of passage such as detailed above. As for who participate in the Lord's Supper, *the answer is all the members of the church.*

### C. Creedal considerations

The creeds of the Reformed churches reflect our traditional understanding that an individual personal profession of faith is required for attendance at the Lord's table. That was the belief current at the time the Reformed confessions were written; hence, they reflect that faith. If we decide, in good Reformational fashion and thought, that upon further reflection, we now see things differently, or more clearly, either we can edit the confessions to reflect our current belief, or we can let them stand as historical documents and write our own confessions. We have precedent for both actions. We have amended Article 36 of the Belgic Confession because we thought its original language was unbiblical; we have moved a whole paragraph from that same article and placed it in a footnote; we have written "Our World Belongs to God," which reflects our conviction that the church can commit to print at any age the faith by which it lives.

### V. Summary

The two reports of the Clarification Committee speak for their particular perspectives as persuasively as possible so that the churches may have the issues clearly before them. We think each to be convincing, biblically grounded, rooted in Reformed theology, and concerned for the well-being of the church.

Both positions affirm the continuity and discontinuity of the old and new covenants. One stresses the elements of continuity (Report B), the other, the elements of discontinuity (Report A).

Both positions affirm the vital necessity of faith in celebrating the Lord's Supper. One stresses personal, individual faith (Report A); the other emphasizes the role of communal or corporate faith (Report B).

Both positions affirm that profession of faith is important and that it needs to be done frequently and at various stages and events in a person's life; the difference is that one position insists that profession of faith needs to be done personally and individually before one can sit at the table, whereas the other says that a communal expression, as in infant baptism, will suffice for small children (Report B). One stresses profession of faith as a single event connected to one's baptism and the Lord's Supper; the other views profession of faith as a way of life, oft-repeated and connected to major rites of passage (Report B).

Both stress the importance of the Lord's Supper for the nurture of faith; one sees the nurturing of faith through participation in the communal meal (Report B), whereas the other sees that faith nurtured for a time by children's observing and listening without participating.

Both see the sacrament as efficacious, but one stresses that the grace of the sacrament is channeled through personal, individual faith, whereas the other emphasizes that the presence of Jesus at the table works for grace for those who come in faith (personal, individual, and corporate, communal) and for judgment for those who do not discern the body (Report B).

Both positions deny baptismal regeneration and this kind of "baptism" as a ground for participation in the Lord's Supper. Report A therefore stresses that both baptism *and* profession of faith are required for participation in the Lord's Supper; Report B focuses not on baptism as a requirement, but upon faith, either of the individual or, as is the case with small children, of the community.

Both have support in the ecclesiastical tradition. Report A refers to the tradition that came out of the Reformation affirming the Roman Catholic practice of requiring confirmation before communion and seeing profession of faith as that confirmation. The other points to the fact that children were participating in the Lord's Supper prior to the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 and to the changing pattern in some Presbyterian and Reformed churches today. As well, it points out that confirmation and baptism were done at the same time in the early church and came to be separated only for some practical reasons (Report B).

### VI. Recommendations

- A. That Rev. Henry Lunshof be given the privilege of the floor when the reports are being discussed.
- B. That synod recognize that there are two clearly distinct perspectives on the grounds for participating in the Lord's Supper—individual faith and communal faith—and that both perspectives have support in the tradition, theology, and practice of the church of Jesus Christ.
- C. That synod allow room within our denomination for the differing practices which each perspective requires.

#### Grounds:

1. There is probably no argument that is persuasive enough to cause advocates on either side to change their perspective.
2. This avoids the necessity of having to say that one perspective is right and the other wrong.

3. If a decision is made for one of the perspectives, a certain segment of the church will be alienated.

D. That the children of covenant families would follow the policy regarding participation in the Lord's Supper that is in effect in the local congregation.

E. That our categories of membership be two: "baptized" members to describe our total church membership count and "corporate" members to describe those who are baptized, have reached the age of majority, have publicly professed their faith in Christ, and have committed themselves to the confessions, practices, and ministries of the church. Each local congregation would be free to decide how it wants to track the children who do or do not participate in the Lord's Supper.

F. That when a church council transfers memberships, it would note for the receiving church whether the children involved have been participating in communion or not so that any pastoral problems arising from that issue can be addressed. Some modifications may need to be made in the forms for transfer of membership.

G. That the following changes be made in the Church Order if the above recommendations are adopted by synod (the proposed changes are underlined; the brackets indicate present wording):

1. Article 3-a

[Confessing] Corporate male members of the church who meet the biblical requirements are eligible for the offices of minister, elder, and evangelist.

2. Article 3-b

All [confessing] corporate members of the church who meet the biblical requirements are eligible for the office of deacon.

3. Article 59-a

Members by baptism shall be [admitted to the Lord's Supper] received into corporate membership in the Christian Reformed Church upon a public profession of Christ according to the Reformed creeds, with the use of the prescribed form. Before the profession of faith the consistory shall examine them concerning their motives, doctrine, and conduct. The names of those [who are to be admitted to the Lord's Supper] involved shall be announced to the congregation for approval at least one Sunday before the public profession of faith.

4. Article 59-b

[Confessing] Corporate members coming from other Christian Reformed congregations shall be [admitted to communicant] received into corporate membership upon the presentation of certificates of membership attesting their soundness in doctrine and life.

5. Article 59-c

[Confessing] Corporate members coming from churches in ecclesiastical fellowship shall be [admitted to communicant] received into corporate membership upon presentation of certificates or statements of membership after the consistory has satisfied itself concerning the doctrine and conduct of

the members. Persons coming from other denominations shall be admitted to [communicant] corporate membership only after the consistory has examined them concerning doctrine and conduct. The consistory shall determine in each case whether to admit them directly or by public reaffirmation or profession of faith. Their names shall be announced to the congregation for approval.

6. Article 66-a

[Confessing] Corporate members who remove to another Christian Reformed church are entitled to a certificate, issued by the council, concerning their doctrine and life. When such certificates of membership are requested, they shall ordinarily be mailed to the church of their new residence.

7. Article 81-c

[Confessing] Corporate members who have been excluded from membership in the church shall be received again into its fellowship upon repentance of their sin.

H. That the work of this committee be declared completed and the committee be discharged.

Committee to Study Clarification of Public  
Profession of Faith for Covenant Children

Wayne A. Brouwer

Eldean Kamp

Henry Lunshof, reporter

Bert Polman