

## **Reconnecting Baptism and the Lord's Supper, Sacraments of the Covenant Community**

[DRAFT]

Synod 2006 of the Christian Reformed Church (hereafter, CRCNA) decided to welcome *all baptized* to the Lord's Supper. By a decisive 2-to-1 margin, the following recommendation was adopted: "That synod allow for the admission of all baptized members to the Lord's Supper on the basis of their full membership in the covenant community."<sup>1</sup>

Synod's decision may seem shocking to a number of people since Profession of Faith has always been the prerequisite to participation in the Lord's Supper. In the CRCNA, some members of the covenant community have always been excluded from Communion. It may be difficult to imagine all baptized children eating and drinking with the rest of the body. This paper intends to explain why the decision of Synod 2006 is more biblically and theologically coherent and reflects a deeper Christian tradition than the CRCNA's practice of exclusion.

### **1. Exegesis:**

#### **1.1. 1 Corinthians 11**

Those who support the doctrine of excluding covenant children from communion believe that 1 Cor. 11:17-34 clearly teaches it. However, such a conclusion is possible only if verses 27-29 are taken out of their historical context. The Apostle Paul's first and foremost concern in chapter 11 is the lack of unity in the Corinthians' relationship to one another at the Supper. His preoccupation is that the community discern the body of believers.

Consider the literary context of chapter 11. Many times throughout his first letter to Corinth, Paul is troubled about divisions within the community. He addresses this issue in 1 Corinthians 1 and 3. In chapter 10, he ties the unity of the body of believers to the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Paul states in 1 Cor. 10:1-5 that *all* members of the old covenant community ate spiritual food and drank spiritual drink from Christ, the spiritual rock. A few verses later, Paul indicates that in the Supper of the new covenant, to eat the bread is to participate in the body of Christ; he adds: "because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body" (10:16-17). Concern for the unity of the body of believers is also central to the Apostle's discussion of spiritual gifts in chapter 12. There he insists that *all* members of the body of Christ are necessary; in fact, "the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and . . . are treated with greater respect" (12:23).

This great emphasis on the unity of the body in chapters 10 and 12 is also found in Paul's

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<sup>1</sup> *Acts of Synod 2006*, p. 730.

critique of Corinthian practices at the Lord's Supper in chapter 11. New Testament scholars have persuasively demonstrated Paul's theological principles in chapter 11 by closely examining the structure of his argument within its historical context.<sup>2</sup> The Apostle's argument has four parts, which together form a chiasm:

A	11:17-22	The Immediate Pastoral Problem: The "have's" abuse of the "have-nots" is destroying the one body of believers.
B	11:23-26	The Consequent Theological Problem: The abuse of one another is abusing Christ and destroying the gospel.
B <sup>1</sup>	11:27-32	The Theological Solution: "Discern the body"
A <sup>1</sup>	11:33-34	The Pastoral Solution: "Wait for/Accept each other"

In verses 17-22 (part A), Paul describes the central pastoral issue in the Corinthians' celebration of the Lord's Supper. Early Christians celebrated the Lord's Supper as part of a meal. Paul hears that when the Christians in Corinth come together for this meal, there are divisions among them (11:18). The divisions are sociological: rich Christians who have houses are celebrating the Lord's Supper in a way that humiliates those Christians "who have nothing" (11:22). The "have's" are abusing the "have nots." Paul asks in verse 22, "Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing [*tous mê echontas*]?"<sup>3</sup>

The precise reason for the social divisions is unclear. One possibility is that rich Christians came early and ate most or all of the food and wine. Verse 21 could be translated: "for as you eat, each of you goes ahead [*prolambano*] without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk."<sup>4</sup> A second possibility is that rich Christians were sitting in a privileged position. Archaeological evidence indicates that the dining room of a typical house church would accommodate only a minority of the members.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the Corinthian church was following the cultural custom of inviting the rich believers into the privileged position of the dining room while the poor believers were relegated to a less desirable room.

<sup>2</sup> My exegetical analysis is indebted especially to Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) and to Jeffrey Weima, "What Paul Was Really Saying to the Corinthians about Celebrating the Lord's Supper," Calvin Symposium on Worship and the Arts, Calvin Theological Seminary, Jan. 28-29, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> See 1 Cor. 1:26 which suggests that the majority of the Corinthian church consists of members of the lower class; a minority of the church belongs to the upper class of society.

<sup>4</sup> If this was the precise historical problem, then the pastoral solution provided in verse 33 should be translated as follows: "So then, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for [*ekdecheste*] one another."

<sup>5</sup> If people reclined at the *agape* meals, there may typically have been room for about 9 to 12 members at the dining room table. See Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *St. Paul's Corinth: Texts and Archaeology* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1983), pp. 153-161.

There is a third possible reason for the social division in the Corinthians' celebration of the Lord's Supper: the rich Christians may have been eating better quality and greater quantities of food. In verse 21, the Greek verb, *prolambano*, could be translated: "for when the time comes to eat, each of you takes your own supper [*prolambano*] with the result that one remains hungry, another gets drunk." Such a problem was not uncommon in Roman culture. For example, Pliny the Younger (b. 61/62 A.D.) writes:

I happened to be dining with a man . . . whose elegant economy, as he called it, seemed to me a sort of stingy extravagance. The best dishes were set in front of himself and a select few, and cheap scraps of food before the rest of the company. He had even put the wine into tiny little flasks, divided into three categories, not with the idea of giving his guests the opportunity of choosing, but to make it impossible for them to refuse what they were given. One lot was intended for himself and for us; another for his lesser friends (all his friends are graded); and a third for his and our freedmen."<sup>6</sup>

Lucian of Samosata (ca. 120-180 A.D.), when writing about such inequities in Roman meal practices, exhorts:

And tell [the waiter] not to give a whole half of the pig and its head to his master when it is brought in, leaving for the others just the bones. And tell the wine servers not to wait for each of us to ask seven times for a drink but on one request to pour it out and hand us at once a big cup, like they do for their master. And let all the guests have the same wine. Where is it laid down that [the master] should get drunk on wine with a fine bouquet while I must burst my belly on new stuff?<sup>7</sup>

In sum, there are several possible reasons for the social divisions which Paul is criticizing in 11:17-22. Perhaps the wealthy were eating at different times or eating in different locations or eating different kinds and quantities of food. Although we do not know the precise reason for the divisions, we do know that the problem arose because wealthy Christians celebrated the Lord's Supper in some way which humiliated poor Christians.

This pastoral problem described in verses 17-22 (part A) has serious theological implications. The abuse of the "have nots" is also an abuse of Christ himself, the One through whose death and resurrection the Corinthians had been formed into His body the church. Since the Corinthians' abuse of one another is an abuse of Christ's body and therefore Christ Himself, Paul needs to take them back to the words of institution in verses 23-26 (part B). He wants to restore the right meaning of the food in their meal. The Lord's Supper is intended to "proclaim the Lord's death" (11:26). Divisive behavior at the meal undermines this Gospel because it fails to proclaim that Christ's death has created a new and united community, a community which is "one body" partaking of "one loaf" (10:16-17). By humiliating "the have-nots" at the Supper, wealthy Corinthians are failing to practice unity and to proclaim what Christ has done. Since the way in which the Corinthians celebrate the Lord's Supper contradicts the message proclaimed by

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<sup>6</sup> *Letters* 2.6.

<sup>7</sup> *Saturnalia* 21-22. I thank Jeffrey A.D. Weima for the references to these extra-biblical texts.

the Supper, they are hypocrites.

In verses 27-32, Paul provides a theological principle which addresses the Corinthian problem of abusing Christ and destroying the Gospel. The Corinthians must “discern the body” (11:29), that is, the church.<sup>8</sup> Paul commands them to “examine” their attitude and behavior toward one another at the Supper. Those who eat and drink in an “unworthy manner” (i.e. without discerning the body of believers) put themselves under the same condemnation as those who originally crucified Christ (11:27). With tragic irony, they are liable for the very death that they are supposed to proclaim as salvation in the Lord’s Supper.<sup>9</sup> Using a wordplay on judgment themes, Paul argues that if the Corinthians “discerned/judged themselves,” they would not be under God’s present judgment (11:31). The Corinthians must change their actions and discern the body of believers so that they will not come under God’s final judgment as well (11:32).

Verses 27-32 must be read in the context of the preceding verses, for Paul is providing a theological solution to the problem indicated in verses 23-26. Part B<sup>1</sup> of his argument is a response to part B. In order to stop abusing Christ and his body (the church), the Corinthians must examine their attitude and behavior toward one another at the Supper. If verses 27-32 are not read in the context of the preceding verses, one could incorrectly assume that Paul is primarily commanding an individualistic, introspective examination of one’s relationship to Christ.<sup>10</sup> However, when verses 27-32 are read in their literary and historical contexts, the Apostle is primarily commanding that the Corinthians change their relationship to one another at the Supper.

Having theologically argued in 11:23-32 that the Corinthians must “discern the body” of believers as they eat the Lord’s Supper, Paul applies this argument specifically to the abuse of the poor. Verses 33-34 (part A<sup>1</sup>) provide a simple and straightforward solution to the pastoral problem described in verses 17-22 (part A). Paul commands: “when you come together to eat, accept/welcome [*ekdechomai*] each other” (11:33). Welcome all members of the body, both poor and rich.

Note the word used in Paul’s command. It has the same Greek root as the word used by Jesus when he welcomed little children: “Whoever welcomes [*dechomai*] a little child like this in my name welcomes me” (Matt. 18:5). Reformed Christians have often used this Gospel text to

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<sup>8</sup> See 10:16-17, where “body” clearly means “the church,” and 12:12-26, where Paul uses different body parts as an analogy for the church. Moreover, in contrast to 11:29, Paul adds “and the blood of the Lord” in 11:27 when he has the physical body of Christ in view. See Fee’s lucid arguments that “body” in 11:29 refers to the body of believers (pp. 563-564).

<sup>9</sup> Fee, p. 559.

<sup>10</sup> The CRCNA’s preparatory exhortation in its form for the celebration of the Lord’s Supper misuses Paul’s words in this way. See *Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids: CRCNA Publications, 1987), p. 978.

support infant baptism and to profess (at least verbally) that believers as well as their children “are received by God in Christ as members of his covenant.”<sup>11</sup> Indeed, all baptized children should be considered members of Christ’s body just as economically poor believers are full members of the body. Paul’s final imperative in 1 Cor. 11:33, “welcome [*ekdechomai*] each other,” sums up well his greatest concern in the entire passage, namely, that the Corinthians at the Lord’s Supper practice the unity which they proclaim as Christ’s one body. Practicing unity entails accepting the “have nots.”

Exegesis of 1 Corinthians 11 does not lead to a doctrine of exclusion. In fact, Paul’s emphasis on the unity of the body at Communion actually suggests the opposite, namely, that *all* members of the covenant community should be *included* at the Table rather than having some “have-nots” who remain spiritually hungry. Baptized children, who “have-not” Communion in the CRCNA, are members of the covenant community just as “have-nots” in the Corinthian church are.

Although there is no explicit command in 1 Cor. 11:17-34 to welcome all baptized children to the Supper, there is certainly not an explicit doctrine of exclusion if this passage is interpreted in its literary and historical contexts. Is there any other way in which the doctrine of exclusion can be built on Scripture? If one uses Reformed hermeneutics, there is no avenue which leads to such a doctrine.

## 1.2. Reformed Hermeneutics

According to Reformed hermeneutics, the theological principles in 1 Cor. 11:17-34 which “transcend the historical particularity” of Corinth may be applied to “genuinely comparable situations.”<sup>12</sup> But as we have already seen, Paul’s principles which transcend their original historical context favor the doctrine of inclusion. Paul is concerned about unity. Divisive behavior abuses Christ’s body, the church, and contradicts the Gospel proclaimed in the Supper. Therefore, in all times and places, the body of believers must be discerning of their attitudes and behavior toward one another as they eat and drink. The way in which believers celebrate the Supper must be consistent with the intended proclamation of the Supper.

Paul’s transcending principles don’t favor the doctrine of exclusion. But *even if they did*, the disobedience at Corinth is not a “genuinely comparable situation” to the issue of baptized children at the Supper. Paul is warning the disobedient at Corinth; he is not warning those who lack adult-like ethical capacity. His warning against divisive behavior applies to people according to their ethical capacity, that is, infants and children should do what they are able to

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<sup>11</sup> “Form for the Baptism of Children,” *Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids: CRCNA Publications, 1987), p. 961.

<sup>12</sup> Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible*, p. 63; cf. Louis Berkhof, *Introduction to Dogmatics*, pp. 174-5.

do, teenagers what they are able to do, adults what they are able to do. If Paul's warnings to the disobedient are applied to the issue of baptized children at the Supper, then Paul's argument is being shifted from the ethical to the physiological. If the ethical standards in 1 Corinthians 11 are applied to infants, then must we not also apply to infants other commands, such as "anyone unwilling to work should not eat" (2 Thess. 3:10)?<sup>13</sup> Abuse of the poor in Corinth and children at the Supper are not genuinely comparable situations.<sup>14</sup>

There is one other avenue by which one may attempt to produce a biblical doctrine of exclusion. According to Reformed hermeneutics, the "general analogy of Scripture" may establish a doctrine as biblical even though no text clearly states the doctrine. A general analogy, says Louis Berkhof, "does not rest on the explicit statements of the Bible, but on the obvious scope and import of its teachings as a whole."<sup>15</sup> Here too, the doctrine of exclusion fails. Not only is there no text that explicitly addresses it but no extended application of texts can point to such a doctrine. John 6 is the only text other than 1 Corinthians 11 that CRCNA synodical reports have pointed to. However, citing two verses (6:35 and 64)—which use the word "believe"—without any reference to their immediate context, and then insinuating the doctrine of exclusion because a description of the Supper appears elsewhere in the same chapter (6:53-58), is neither an argument nor an appropriate example of Reformed hermeneutics.<sup>16</sup> *Even if* an argument could somehow be made that the word "believe" in these two verses implies that participants in the Supper have an informed faith, such a connection should be read according to Reformed covenant theology. That is how the Reformed tradition interprets the command to repent in a baptism text such as Acts 2:38.

### **1.3. CRCNA: Reformed on Baptism texts, but Baptist on Lord's Supper texts?**

In 1995, Report B (*Agenda for Synod 1995*, pp. 265-274) pointed out that Reformed Christians have always read biblical texts about baptism from a covenant-communal rather than an individualistic perspective. When Acts 2:38 commands, "repent and be baptized," Reformed

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<sup>13</sup> Paul Jewett, *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), pp. 199-200.

<sup>14</sup> Even if one could somehow argue that they are comparable, Reformed hermeneutics would expect that another passage(s) of Scripture would clearly spell out the doctrine which an extended application of Paul's principles in 1 Cor. 11:17-34 is purported to teach (see Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible*, p. 62; cf. Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, p. 166, point 3). But again, as we have said, no biblical text clearly spells out the doctrine of exclusion.

<sup>15</sup> *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, pp. 163-164.

<sup>16</sup> For examples of such "exegesis," see *Agenda for Synod 1988*, p. 291, and *Agenda for Synod 1995*, p. 267.

Christians argue that *communal* repentance and faith is necessary before baptism.<sup>17</sup> Those who reject infant baptism argue that *individual* faith is necessary. Titus 3:5 is another text that could undermine infant baptism if read from an individualistic perspective. When this text calls baptism “the washing of regeneration,” an individualistic interpretation could conclude that either we must be willing to say that every infant who is baptized is regenerated or we must wait to baptize infants until they are able to repent and declare their faith.<sup>18</sup>

Report B argued that Reformed Christians should avoid an individualistic interpretation of baptism texts as well as Lord’s Supper texts. Words in 1 Corinthians 11 such as “proclaim” (11:26), “examine” (11:28), and “discerning” (11:29) should be understood no differently from “repent” in connection with baptism. In other words, examining and repenting are absolutely necessary but required first of all of the community and then of the individuals within it according to their capacity.<sup>19</sup>

Synod 1995 stated that they “did not find Report B’s interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11 compelling enough to eliminate the need for an individual response of faith as a prerequisite to communion.”<sup>20</sup> Synod provided no reasons for why Report B was not compelling, but the implications are troubling. By rejecting Report B’s covenant-communal biblical interpretation, did Synod 1995 also unwittingly undermine one of the strongest Reformed approaches to the issue of infant baptism? Synod 1995 favored Report A which argued that the new covenant implies an internalization of faith; therefore, Report A concluded, since the Lord’s Supper is a sacrament of the new covenant, “regeneration and a faith commitment of the heart are the necessary prerequisites.”<sup>21</sup> Since baptism is a sacrament of the new covenant, are regeneration and a faith commitment necessary prerequisites? To say so would be a potentially fatal blow to infant baptism.<sup>22</sup> Here Report A and the 1995 Synod remain silent.

#### 1.4. Summary

There is not biblical support for excluding baptized children from the Lord’s Supper. In

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<sup>17</sup> E.g. Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. says, “in the case of infant baptism, the faith of parents and the rest of the believing community ‘stands in’ for the infant” (*A Sure Thing: Teacher’s Manual* [Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1986], p. 117).

<sup>18</sup> *Agenda 1995*, p. 291.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 293.

<sup>20</sup> *Acts of Synod 1995*, p. 714.

<sup>21</sup> *Agenda 1995*, p. 267.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Jewett who argues that repudiating infant communion seriously threatens infant baptism (*Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace*, p. 42).

1 Corinthians 11, Paul is concerned that the wealthy are mistreating the poor, that the “have’s” are abusing the “have nots.” Paul’s emphasis on the unity of the body at Communion suggests that *all* members of the covenant community should be *included* at the Table rather than having some “have-nots” who remain spiritually hungry. Although there is no explicit command in 1 Cor. 11:17-34 to welcome all baptized children to the Supper, there is certainly not an explicit doctrine of exclusion if this passage is interpreted in its historical context. Moreover, if one uses Reformed hermeneutics, a doctrine of exclusion cannot even be inferred from this passage. The theological principles which “transcend the historical particularity” of Corinth do not favor such a doctrine. Even if they did, the abuse of the poor in Corinth and baptized children at the Supper are not “genuinely comparable situations.” A general analogy of Scripture also fails to support a doctrine of exclusion. And finally, *even if* a text such as 1 Corinthians 11 is interpreted out of its historical context, or even if an argument is somehow made that the abuse of the poor and baptized children at the Supper are comparable situations, Paul’s words should be read from a covenantal perspective just as baptism texts are.

Although there is no avenue which will lead to a biblical doctrine of exclusion, the CRCNA has allowed this doctrine to undermine or contradict Reformed theology, especially a Reformed understanding of the covenant, the sacraments, church membership, and grace.

## 2. Reformed Theology

*The continuity between the old and new covenants* is undermined by the doctrine of exclusion. Participation in circumcision, in the Passover, and in baptism, is based on being a member of the covenant community of faith. For most of church history, the same basis has been used for participation in the Lord’s Supper. A doctrine of exclusion, by contrast, presumes a striking discontinuity between old and new covenants: whereas all members of the old covenant community ate spiritual food and drank spiritual drink from Christ (1 Cor. 10:1-5), the youngest members of the new covenant community are excluded from Christ’s Table. A doctrine of exclusion makes the new covenant appear less generous than the old.<sup>23</sup>

*The unity of the sacraments* is also undermined by the doctrine of exclusion. According to Reformed theology, baptism proclaims Christ’s one sacrifice on the cross and promises forgiveness of sin to the covenant community of faith.<sup>24</sup> The Lord’s Supper also proclaims and promises these things.<sup>25</sup> According to the doctrine of exclusion, however, baptism can proclaim

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<sup>23</sup> Note Jewett’s description of the incongruity of Paedobaptists’ understanding of the relationship between the covenants: they use the sword of circumcision to argue that children are included in the covenant and should be baptized. Then they “grip the sword of circumcision . . . by the point” by excluding those baptized children from the covenant community at Communion (*Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace*, p. 205).

<sup>24</sup> *Heid. Cat. Q&A 69.*

<sup>25</sup> *Heid. Cat. Q&A 75.*



these promises to all members of the covenant community of faith whereas the Lord's Supper proclaims the very same promises *only* to individuals who can express their faith. If the remaining members of the covenant community (i.e. baptized children) participate, the Lord's Supper proclaims judgment.<sup>26</sup> The doctrine of exclusion presumes a remarkable discontinuity between the sacraments.<sup>27</sup>

If God intended these remarkable discontinuities, it's surprising that He never explicitly mentions it, but expects His people to infer it by an extended application of 1 Cor. 11:27-29 taken out of its historical context. Most of God's people have not inferred such discontinuities between the covenants and between the sacraments. Throughout most of church history, believers and all their baptized children have been welcomed to come to Jesus at the Table. For the majority of its history, as we will see below, the church did not hear God in 1 Cor. 11:27-29 threatening judgment on covenant children who could not yet individually express their faith.

*The partnership between the preached Word and the sacramental Word* is undermined by the doctrine of exclusion. Calvin and the Reformed confessions usually emphasize continuity between preaching and the sacraments. Both argue that the preached Word and the sacramental Word do the very same thing, that is, they proclaim the Gospel and unite us to Christ. Preaching simply does it audibly whereas the sacraments do it more tangibly.<sup>28</sup> For Calvin, preaching and the sacraments are two sides of the same coin. It's no surprise, therefore, that he advocates weekly Communion.<sup>29</sup> He does not want the preached Word without the sacramental Word. They belong together in the worship of the covenant community.

Curiously, although Calvin and the confessions declare that preaching and the sacraments do the same thing, they also want to argue that some covenant members may not receive the Lord's Supper. Even though this is the form of Gospel proclamation which is easier to comprehend, even though this is the more tangible form which demonstrates God's loving accommodation to our weakness,<sup>30</sup> some young members are not allowed access. This exclusion is ironic. For, given God's accommodating pedagogy, is it not possible that the young may sometimes receive the Gospel by faith through the tangible sacraments first, before they are able

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<sup>26</sup> See below for John Calvin's argument that "we offer poison . . . to our tender children" if we allow them to participate in the Lord's Supper.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Jewett who argues out that this "theological hiatus" between the sacraments allows those who reject "believers' baptism" to advocate "believers' communion" (*Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace*, pp. 200-201).

<sup>28</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 4.14.17; 4.17.5; Calvin, "Short Treatise on the Lord's Supper," p. 144; *Belgic Conf.* art. 33; *Heid. Cat.* Q&A 66.

<sup>29</sup> *Institutes* 4.17.44.

<sup>30</sup> "Short Treatise on the Lord's Supper," p. 144.

to do so through preaching?<sup>31</sup> If so, then the doctrine of exclusion short-circuits God's accommodating pedagogy and forces young covenant members to be content with alternative tangible forms of the Gospel, such as the object lessons of "Children's Messages."

*If it can somehow be shown that Calvin's doctrine of exclusion for the Lord's Supper is appropriate, then must we not also have a doctrine of exclusion for preaching? Many texts warn about the danger of hearing and not responding to the Word in faith (Ps. 95:7-10; Lk. 6:49; Jn. 12:47-48; Rom. 2:13; James 1:22-25). Since preaching and the sacraments are two sides of the same coin, should we not only fear that children will "eat and drink judgment" but also fear that children may "hear judgment"? The former fear is based on a highly questionable extended application of a single text taken out of context whereas the latter fear is based on a more straightforward application of several texts. To be consistent, should we not clap our hands over the ears of the same children whom we exclude from the Table? Or should the texts about the danger of hearing and the 1 Corinthians 11 text both be interpreted as speaking to the disobedient rather than to those lacking sufficient ethical capacity?*

*Continuity in church membership is undermined by the doctrine of exclusion. The CRCNA has "baptized members" and "confessing members." Is membership in the CRCNA comparable to Orwell's famous phrase in *Animal Farm*, as if to say "all members in the church are members, but some members are more members than others?" Isn't a person either a member of the covenant or not a member? Currently in the CRCNA, when an infant is baptized, that infant becomes a member of the covenant community. The infant is then subsequently "excluded from Communion," which, incidentally, is the definition of "excommunicant." When the baptized excommunicants later make an individual profession of faith and become communicant, we call them confessing members. Why do we insist on such a period of discontinuity or "excommunication" for covenant children? According to Reformed theology, baptism is a sign and seal of initiation into covenant relationship and the Supper is a sign and seal of continuity in that relationship.<sup>32</sup> If we believe that our baptized infants are members of the covenant and continue to participate in Christ's body from initiation onward, why are they not allowed at the Supper which is a sign of the continuity of that relationship?<sup>33</sup> Our actions at the Table imply that we don't really believe our claim that baptized infants share in the body of Christ.*

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<sup>31</sup> Several contemporary educators and social scientists assert that it is within ages two to six (the "first stage of faith") where children exhibit the greatest and most decisive responsiveness to symbols and rituals. E.g. James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981); Urban T. Holmes, *Young Children and the Eucharist* (New York: Seabury Press, 1982); John H. Westerhoff, III, *Building God's People in a Materialistic Society* (New York: Seabury Press, 1983), esp. pp. 59-78.

<sup>32</sup> *Heid. Cat. Q&A* 79.

<sup>33</sup> See 1 Cor. 10:16.

Finally, a doctrine of exclusion *contradicts God's grace proclaimed in the sacrament*. By requiring a personal profession of faith before participating in the Lord's Supper, we communicate that the "works" of right understanding and personal commitment make us worthy to receive a communal means of grace.<sup>34</sup> Should the baptized pass a test in order to receive the gracious promise of forgiveness of sins proclaimed in the sacrament? If no biblical text teaches a doctrine of exclusion, is it theologically appropriate for baptized children to demonstrate a certain worthiness of their individual faith before their faith may be graciously nourished in the sacraments? To all such questions, Augustine would clearly answer, "no!" For Augustine, infants and the mentally impaired were the ideal subjects for the sacraments, for they image the helplessness of the human condition. Humans come to their heavenly Father in the sacraments with the same helpless abandon as sucking infants do to their mothers.<sup>35</sup> Max Johnson summarizes Augustine's sentiment well when he says: Christian life, from entrance into the covenant community onward, is rooted in the graciousness of God, the God who through the Word and sacraments "always acts first, always acts in love prior to our action, leading us by the Holy Spirit to the response of faith, hope, and love within the community of grace."<sup>36</sup>

To summarize our brief theological excursion: the doctrine of exclusion seems to compromise the coherence of biblically-based Reformed theology of the covenant, the sacraments, membership or participation in the body of Christ, and grace. Reformed theology is contradicted even more when one considers the history behind the doctrine of exclusion.

### 3. History:

#### 3.1. The unified rites of initiation and their medieval breakdown

The history of children at the Lord's Supper is essentially the story of the relationship between the sacraments. In the early church, all baptized were welcome at Communion. This practice was gradually abandoned in the later Middle Ages, so that by the Reformation the Western church had separated the Lord's Supper from baptism and attached it to confirmation or profession of faith. Today, Protestant denominations have begun to re-unite baptism and the Lord's Supper.

The story begins in the early church, when the sacraments were intimately connected. Ancient liturgies show that both baptism and Communion were part of the rites of initiation which marked a person's entrance into the community of Christ's body, the Church. These rites

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<sup>34</sup> See Syd Hielema, "A Precious Feast, a Tangled Web: A case for Welcoming Children at the Table," *Reformed Worship* 76 (June 2005): 25-27.

<sup>35</sup> See David Holeyton, *Infant Communion: Then and Now*, Grove Liturgical Study 27 (Bramcote, Nottingham: Grove Books, 1981), p. 6.

<sup>36</sup> Maxwell Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), p. 376.

or ceremonies included baptism, a laying on of hands (later referred to as confirmation), and immediate participation in Communion. From the day of one's baptism onward, the Lord's Supper was the part of a person's entrance into the church which was repeated throughout life.<sup>37</sup>

Clear references to very young children at Communion go back as far as the earliest arguments for infant baptism. Cyprian (d. 258 A.D.), the bishop-martyr of Carthage who is considered the Father of ecclesiology, was the first theologian in the early church to offer a significant rationale for infant baptism.<sup>38</sup> He is also the first undisputed witness to infant communion as the conclusion of the baptismal rite.<sup>39</sup> David Holeton summarizes Cyprian's theology of Christian initiation:

[Cyprian] bears witness to the coupling of John 3:5 ("Unless a man be born again of water and the Spirit . . .") and John 6:53 ("Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man . . .") as a single *logion* in the *traditio fidei*, establishing what is necessary for participation in the Christian community. . . . It is baptism and eucharist which establish membership in the Christian community. Membership in the community thereafter depends, for Cyprian, on continued participation in the eucharist. . . . [F]or Cyprian the eucharist is as necessary for the Christian as is baptism, and for both sacraments age is unimportant. Baptism and the eucharist are inseparable and for Cyprian it is the eucharist that creates the Christian community. To abandon the eucharist is to abandon the community and to abandon either is to abandon Christ.<sup>40</sup>

Augustine also administered the Eucharist to infants immediately after their baptism.<sup>41</sup> He considered the Lord's Supper as so intimately tied to the rites of initiation that his "theology of baptism could at the same time be a theology of Eucharist."<sup>42</sup> In his Easter sermons to the newly baptized, Augustine compared the stages of initiation to making bread: during Lent, people who would be baptized at Easter were "milled" and "sifted" so that they become pure flour; they were "moistened" at their baptism so that they became a single doughy mass; and they were "baked" by the fire of the Holy Spirit in their chrismation. Augustine would cite 1 Cor. 12:27 ("You are the body of Christ and individually members of it") and 10:17 ("we who

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<sup>37</sup> For an analysis of the church orders and other liturgical sources from the second through the fifth centuries, see *ibid.*, pp. 33-158.

<sup>38</sup> *Epistle 64* (in *Ante-Nicene Fathers 5*, p. 354).

<sup>39</sup> Therefore, Jewett concludes, it seems difficult "to suppose that infant communion stems from a later misunderstanding of Scripture, while infant baptism altogether escapes this difficulty" (p. 42).

<sup>40</sup> *Infant Communion*, p. 5.

<sup>41</sup> See esp. *Sermones 174.7* and *Epistle 217*.

<sup>42</sup> William Harmless, "Baptism," in *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, p. 88 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

are many are one body, for we all partake of one bread”). Then he would point to the bread of the Lord’s Supper and tell the newly baptized that they who are now part of the body of Christ will receive the body of Christ in Communion. The rites of initiation make people the body of Christ, and the bread in the Eucharist is the body of Christ. Christ’s church body and sacramental body are united in the Supper. Augustine declared to the baptized: “the mystery that you are lies there on the table; it is your own mystery that you receive.” When they received the bread, Augustine exhorts them to “be what you see, and receive what you are.”<sup>43</sup>

A number of references in Augustine imply that participation of all baptized in Communion was the universal practice of the Church and assumed to be ancient. The practice of first communion immediately following baptism continued through most of the Middle Ages. Infants participated by some accommodating means such as receiving in their mouths the priest’s little finger dipped in the wine. For nearly twelve centuries, the church in the east and in the west agreed that communion was a part of initiation.<sup>44</sup>

Although the Eastern church has always allowed baptized infants to commune, there were several developments in the medieval West which contributed to a gradual split between baptism, laying on of hands, and the Lord’s Supper.<sup>45</sup> First, out of concern to preserve the power of bishops, the West insisted on the principle, “no bishop, no confirmation.” As Christianity spread from urban centers, a bishop was not available in many regions to confirm a baptized infant. In outlying villages, it might be several years after a baptism before confirmation by a bishop was possible, and when a bishop would finally pass through a village, sometimes he would simply confirm from horseback. A delay in confirmation often resulted in a delay in a child’s first Communion. In contrast to the West, the East insisted on the principle of retaining the unity of initiation, and so presbyters in the East were allowed to confirm a baptism immediately if a bishop was not available. Therefore, the Eastern church has always allowed a newly baptized person to participate in the Eucharist.

Second, the Western church formulated the doctrine of transubstantiation in the thirteenth century. This doctrine claimed that the substance of bread and wine changes into the actual body and blood of Jesus. The alarming question arose: what might happen if a child dropped the

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<sup>43</sup> *Sermones* 272; see also *Sermones* 227, 229, 229A.

<sup>44</sup> Although infant communion had essentially disappeared in the West by the sixteenth century, not even the Council of Trent (1562 A.D.) completely abolished the practice but simply declared it unnecessary. See *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, trans. H.J. Schroeder (Rockford, IL: Tan Books, 1941). For commentary, see Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation*, pp. 281-282; and J.D.C. Fisher, *Christian Initiation: Baptism in the Medieval West: A Study in the Disintegration of the Primitive Rite of Initiation* (London: SPCK, 1965), pp. 106-107.

<sup>45</sup> See especially Fisher, *Christian Initiation*; and Johnson, *Rites of Initiation*, pp. 177-226. Also, Nathan Mitchell, “Dissolution of the Rite of Christian Initiation,” in *Made, Not Born* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976), pp. 50-82.

actual body of Christ on the floor or slobbered into the chalice of Christ's actual blood? Fear that a child might profane the consecrated elements led to a reluctance to give Communion to young children.

Third, in the later Middle Ages, the Communion cup was withheld from the laity. Adults were left with the bread and infants with nothing, for the general practice for centuries was to commune infants with wine alone since they would choke on the bread. In the fifteenth century, the followers of the martyr John Hus tried to restore the cup to the laity, in part, for the sake of young children.<sup>46</sup>

Fourth, the dominant Lord's Supper piety in the later Middle Ages was heavily penitential. It was necessary for a person to make confession and do penance in order to receive communion. Since very young children did not have the ability to confess or do penance as older children or adults did, they were not as worthy to participate in Communion.

Fifth, confirmation was "a practice looking for a theology."<sup>47</sup> Originally a laying on of hands, confirmation gradually became separated from baptism: "shorn of connection to baptism, [it] became a dangling participle."<sup>48</sup> This independent practice begged explanation. The best that medieval scholasticism mustered was to say that confirmation was a sacrament which augmented the grace of baptism so that a person could bear witness to the faith. Since infants did not need to bear witness to their faith, it was reasoned that they did not need this sacrament until they were older and ready to confirm their place in the church.

Many parents, it seems, did not think very highly of this theology. During the later Middle Ages, they increasingly disrespected confirmation and did not bother having their children confirmed. Councils responded with threats of severe punishments for negligent parents. The Council of Worcester (1240 A.D.), for example, threatened to bar parents from church if they did not have their children confirmed. Confirmation had fallen to such a low esteem among the laity that the success of such conciliar measures was meager and short lived. More severe sanctions seemed necessary. The Council of Lambeth (1281) declared that children would not be allowed to the sacrament of the Lord's Body and blood until they had been confirmed.<sup>49</sup>

### 3.2. John Calvin

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<sup>46</sup> John Hinant, *Children at the Lord's Supper* (Indianapolis: Three Fountains Publishing, 2005), pp. 25-32; Tim Gallant, *Feed My Lambs: Why the Lord's Table Should be Restored to Covenant Children* (Grand Prairie, AB: Pactum Reformanda Publishing, 2002), pp. 125-129.

<sup>47</sup> James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship, Revised Edition* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), p. 211.

<sup>48</sup> James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship*, p. 212.

<sup>49</sup> Fisher, *Christian Initiation*, pp. 122-124.

Calvin gives no indication that he knows these reasons for the gradual separation of baptism and the Lord's Supper. By the time of the Reformation, Roman Catholics had established in most places a new threshold for first Communion: an "age of discretion," not baptism, was necessary for participation. Calvin does not question that assumption. He does reject confirmation as a sacrament, declaring: "How I wish that we might have kept the custom which . . . existed among the ancient Christians before this misborn wraith of a sacrament came to birth!" Calvin also finds the term "confirmation" problematic because "to confirm" baptism does an injustice to baptism. Yet Calvin did salvage the essential confirmation practice of having an individual give an account of his or her faith before the church prior to first Communion.<sup>50</sup> By favoring individual profession over the early church's post-baptismal blessing and laying on of hands, Calvin kept far more of the misborn wraith than he perhaps realized.

For biblical support, Calvin turns to Paul's command "to examine oneself" by "discerning the body" (1 Cor. 11:28-29), a text which was not used in the early church or Middle Ages to keep young children from Communion. In his commentary, Calvin downplays the problems with the Supper at Corinth. He claims that Paul is not even speaking specifically about division at the Supper in verses 17-19. Without pointing to textual evidence, Calvin states, "it is certainly unlikely that Paul would have used such improper and unsuitable terms for describing that disorder [at the Table]."<sup>51</sup> When Paul, in verses 20-22, talks about Corinthians at the Supper who are drunk and others who are hungry, Calvin claims that the Apostle is exaggerating. Without providing historical or textual support for his conclusion, Calvin declares that Paul "describes the inequality hyperbolically."<sup>52</sup> Regarding verses 23-29, Calvin is "of the opinion" that Paul is not addressing the situation at Corinth specifically but is speaking "of every kind of faulty administration or reception of the Supper."<sup>53</sup> By taking the text out of its context, Calvin can conclude that "we offer poison . . . to our tender children" at the Supper, for it is vain to expect them "to distinguish rightly the holiness of Christ's body."<sup>54</sup> This conclusion is based on an interpretation that pays less attention to the historical and literary contexts of 1 Corinthians 11 than his favorite ancient interpreter John Chrysostom did or than modern Reformed interpreters do.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> *Institutes* 4.19.13.

<sup>51</sup> *Comm. on 1 Cor.* 11:18.

<sup>52</sup> *Comm. on 1 Cor.* 11:21.

<sup>53</sup> *Comm. on 1 Cor.* 11:27.

<sup>54</sup> *Institutes* 4.16.30.

<sup>55</sup> E.g. see Jeffrey A.D. Weima, "Children at the Lord's Supper and the Key Text of 1 Corinthians 11:17-34," *Calvin Theological Seminary Forum* (Spring 2007): 7-8.

Calvin's other argument for an age of discretion is based on an assumption about the Passover. He claims: "the Passover, the place of which has been taken by the Supper, did not admit all guests indiscriminately, but was duly eaten only by those who were old enough to be able to inquire into its meaning."<sup>56</sup> No biblical or historical text clearly supports Calvin's claim.

As Calvin makes clear at the end of his very brief arguments for an age of discretion, he simply takes for granted that this practice is so logical that it should not be given a second thought: "if [those who oppose this practice] had a particle of sound brain left, would they be blind to a thing so clear and obvious?"<sup>57</sup> Although Calvin's *ad hominem* attack is inexcusable, his confident assumption about an age of discretion is not completely surprising. One generation of the church often inherits practices of the previous generation without being fully aware of their roots. Calvin would likely have been troubled to know that the late medieval legacy of separating baptism and the Lord's Supper was caused by the principle of conserving the power of bishops, by the doctrine of transubstantiation, by the ability to do penance, by withholding the cup from the laity, and by the punishment of parents who disrespected the sacrament of confirmation.

The story of baptism and the Lord's Supper is essentially this: what the early church joined together, the later medieval church gradually put asunder. Today, Protestants are returning to the practice of the early church. For biblical and theological reasons, the Reformed Church in America, Christian Reformed Churches of Australia, Presbyterian Church (USA), Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Anglican Communion, and others have re-united the sacraments. One body in baptism sharing one bread.

#### 4. **Ministry: The potential erosion of infant baptism, Reformed identity, community, and discipleship**

Covenant children at the Table is not an isolated ministry issue. To what extent may the trends in CRCNA ministry described below be related to our current practice of exclusion?

The erosion of the theology and practice of *infant baptism*: Are multiple types of membership theologically confusing, falsely communicating that a baptized member is only a partial member and that profession of faith (and participation in Communion) is "joining the church" and is "full" or "real" membership? Is profession of faith functioning as the second half of baptism and does it thus have quasi-sacramental status? Does the emphasis on individual faith in profession of faith and in participation in Communion erode an understanding of the covenant emphasis in infant baptism?

The erosion of *Reformed identity*: Since profession of faith has long been associated with

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<sup>56</sup> *Institutes* 4.16.30

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*



catechism training, does lowering the age of profession, but still requiring it as a prerequisite to the Supper, contribute to the eclipse of catechesis in the CRCNA?

The erosion of an inter-generational *community*: Does the doctrine of exclusion contribute to segregation by age in worship, small groups, social activities, or educational programs? For example, do the segregated practices of “Children and Worship” programs (with their children’s “feast time”) and of “Children’s sermons” (with their accommodating object lessons) now serve as a poor substitute for what young baptized members should receive at the Communion feast? Does the doctrine of exclusion contribute in any way to a chief lament among youth ministers, namely, that children and youth ministries are treated as somehow outside the rest of the church’s life and ministry?<sup>58</sup>

The erosion or stagnation of *discipleship*: Does profession of faith as a culmination of the education process contribute to a sense that a person has “arrived”? Does growth in sanctification tend to plateau? Why does the CRCNA expect so much participation in education classes for its “baptized members” and so little for its “professing members”? Do we disciple or hold adults accountable when they are unrepentantly comfortable with a stagnant faith-life?

To what extent could the trends above be ameliorated if the sacraments of the covenant community were reconnected and all members of the covenant were welcomed to the Table? Reconnecting baptism and the Lord’s Supper may help to shore up infant baptism, clarify the meaning of “membership,” enhance Reformed identity, and promote perpetual growth in sanctification rather than a sense of arrival.

## 5. An ancient-future proposal

Let’s recover baptism as our core identity! Baptism is our union with Christ in his death and resurrection (Rom. 6:3; Col. 2:12; 1 Pet. 2:9), it is our new-birth day (John 3:5; Titus 3:5), it is the divine promise of forgiveness of sins through Christ’s blood (Acts 2:38; 22:16; 1 Pet. 3:21; Heb. 10:22), it is the promised gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38; 19:1-6; Matt. 3:16-17; Heb. 6:4; 1 Cor. 6:11), and it is our incorporation into Christ’s body, the covenant community, the church (1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:28). *Baptism is a person’s one and only kind of membership in the one body of faith!* It has been thus since ancient times.

The entire Christian life, including participation at the Table, grows out of a person’s baptismal identity. The newly baptized are immediately welcomed as full members into the community of God’s people where His Word and Spirit are at work through preaching and the sacraments. The Lord’s Supper is the only part of a person’s baptismal celebration that is repeated throughout life. The Supper, then, is a sort of communal baptismal renewal ceremony,

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<sup>58</sup> E.g. Syd Hielema, “Editorial: Being the Church Together,” *Banner* (October 2004), pp. 6-7; and Karen Wilk, “Joel’s Dream Team Seeks to Integrate Children, Youth Ministry into Mainstream,” *CRC Source* (Spring 2004), p. 10.

a covenant renewal ceremony. If a person entering a local community desires re-baptism, let us urge them to the Supper which is rooted and in continuity with their initiation into God's family.

The Lord's Supper is the sign and seal of a covenant relationship initiated at baptism. This relationship continues without interruption until a person is excommunicated for unrepentance or is fully united with God when he brings in the new heaven and the new earth. It is the church's expectation that a person, through preaching and the Supper, will always—according to their capacity—continue to grow in understanding of and faithfulness in the covenant. Elders, of course, should hold members accountable and by their attentive care of souls, encourage such growth in sanctification regardless of a person's age.

To promote this life of sanctification, let's encourage numerous professions or testimonies throughout a person's life instead of only one public profession. Examples of when a congregation might encourage such testimonies include the following: after a child is no longer in nursery or "Children and Worship" and has been worshiping with congregation for a period of time (approximately age 7 to 9); after a young person has had the opportunity to study the Reformed confessions (approx. 16-18); after a person has graduated and has spent some time in a vocation using the gifts God has given (20-28); when a person is married; when a person presents a child for baptism; when a person survives a deadly physical or mental disease or addiction or doubt; when a person has evangelized someone; when a person has made a significant stride in sanctification; when a person has lost a loved one; etc.

The profession made after the confessions are vigorously and substantially studied could function as an informed, public commitment to live out one's faith within the Reformed community, and this profession could be a prerequisite to holding ordained office or voting. But that profession should *not* be tied to participation in the Supper and it should *not* be tied to a distinct "membership" of some kind.

Logistics of administering the Supper to infants at their baptism and to very young children can be worked out by local congregations. The presence of very young children may promote less individualistic ways of administering the Supper. In order to place juice on the lips of children, perhaps congregations will more often gather around a table(s) or come forward to receive the food and drink.

## **6. Conclusion: Hog fungus and poison**

Imagine the irony of singing at a Communion service the words of *Psalter Hymnal* 516:3, "Here our children find a welcome in the Shepherd's flock and fold; here, as bread and wine are taken, Christ sustains us as of old . . ." In fact, covenant children are currently *not* fully welcome. The CRCNA's doctrine of exclusion rejects Christ's offer to sustain children as He did of old. The doctrine is riddled with exegetical and theological problems, suffers from an embarrassing historical legacy, and may contribute to current negative trends in ministry. Biblically, the doctrine of exclusion rests on taking a few verses in 1 Corinthians 11 out of their

historical and theological context; no biblical text states the doctrine and it cannot be established by a general analogy of Scripture. Theologically, the doctrine of exclusion contradicts or is in significant tension with Reformed theology, including its understanding of the continuity between old and new covenants, the continuity between the sacraments, the partnership between the preached Word and the sacramental Word, membership in the church, and grace. Historically, the doctrine of exclusion arises out of the preservation of hierarchical power, the doctrine of transubstantiation, the medieval requirements of penitential works, the punishment of parents who disrespected the sacrament of confirmation, and Calvin's non-contextual exegesis decorated with *ad hominem* attack. In the CRCNA's ministry, the doctrine of exclusion may be contributing to the erosion of infant baptism, of Reformed identity, of inter-generational community, and of continual growth in sanctification.

Martial (40-104 A.D.) wrote the following about the inequities between rich and poor in Roman meal practices:

Since I am asked to dinner . . . why is not the same dinner served to me as to you? You take oysters fattened in the Lucrine lake, I suck a mussel through a hole in the shell. You get mushrooms, I take hog funguses. You tackle turbot, but I brill. Golden with fat, a turtledove gorges you with its bloated rump, but there is set before me a magpie that has died in its cage. Why do I dine without you, Ponticus, though I dine with you? . . . Let us eat the same fare.<sup>59</sup>

In the first century, the poor at least had hog funguses. Today, while we adults spiritually eat "high off the hog" at the Supper, we give our covenant children no food from the Lord's Table. Are the "have's" abusing or humiliating the "have nots"? Following Paul's two commands in 1 Corinthians 11, let us "examine" our attitude and behavior toward one another at the Table. Do we perceive and treat baptized children as if they are covenant members? If we do and if there is no biblical command to "not let the children come," then let us, as the Apostle commands, "welcome" the have-nots of Christ's body. Is it possible that if we fail to do so, it's not the children who need to be protected from "poison" at the Table but we ourselves who may come under judgment (11:31)?

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<sup>59</sup> *Epigram* 3.60.