

Children and Communion

Among Children's Ministry staff and volunteers there are questions, such as, 'When is a child ready to take communion? How do I respond to children and their parents when they ask if their child can take communion?'

Congregations vary in their perspective of when a person can participate in communion even among Canadian Baptist churches.

This article is meant to help families and Children's Ministry leaders who want to help children understand and eventually prepare to take communion. If your context allows for the possibility of children participating in communion, then this article can provide some guidance on how to journey with a child.

Theologically, who can take communion?

In the Bible the only prerequisite to taking communion is a commitment to be a follower of Jesus. I Corinthians 11:17-34 explains the meaning of eating and drinking together.

²³ For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this **in remembrance of me.**" ²⁵ In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, **in remembrance of me.**" ²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, **you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.**" (ESV)

The bread and cup represent the body and blood of Christ and we are to take this meal in remembrance of Him.

There is, however, a warning in verses 27 - 29 about the way a participant takes the elements.

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹ For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. (ESV)

What does it mean to eat the bread or drink the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner? Our worthiness comes from Christ, not from ourselves so this admonition doesn't refer to being perfect. Yet, looking at the context in chapter 11, from verse 17 we see that in the church of Corinth some Christians were using the supper as a matter of self indulgence some even getting drunk. There was unconfessed sin among the believers. They were valuing some people over others, those with wealth were elevated while those who were poor were left hungry and not respected. They didn't wait for one another but each took what they wanted when they wanted.

Believers are to examine their motives, wait for one another, and respect each other. They are to examine whether there is unconfessed sin in their hearts.

Is a child able to examine him or her self such that they take communion in a worthy manner? It has been observed that it is possible for a child to learn to examine themselves and take the elements with the awe and seriousness mandated by these Bible passages.

So, when in a child's development are they able to understand God's provision of salvation?

What are children capable of understanding?

Children are in a process of spiritual growth, just as they are in a process to develop physically, emotionally and socially. With each stage as they develop they can respond to God in different ways. As they grow there comes a time when they are developmentally capable of understanding God's redemptive story. The Spirit is at work in their lives to draw them to Jesus and children can make a commitment to following Christ.

The Christian Reformed Church has put together a great tool to explain some of the spiritual developmental phases. Open this document then scroll down to get to the charts, 'Spiritual Characteristics of Children'. https://www.crcna.org/sites/default/files/welcoming_children_to_the_lords_supper_toolkit.pdf

As you read over the list you will notice a progression in a child's spiritual understanding and the implications that has on the practice of communion.

For example, preschoolers readily accept what you tell them about God. They sense God's love for them and sense that God is special and real. They are learning respect of this important event by observing their parent's reverence while taking communion.

As the child moves into kindergarten, they have a strong sense of who God is and can relate to Him as their friend. Because of that they can readily accept that we practice this communion meal because it reminds us of how much God loves each one.

In early elementary ages, children can more fully understand basic salvation concepts and make a commitment to Jesus. Their awareness of right and wrong increases. Gradually, in these years, their understanding of symbolism deepens and then they recognize that the bread and juice reminds them of Jesus' body and blood given through his death on the cross.

When is a child ready to participate?

The decision for when a child will take communion is up to the parents with guidance from their local church. The parent is the one who knows their child the best. They watch their child day to day and will have a good idea of whether the child is committed to following Jesus. Parents are urged to be prayerful, seeking the Lord's discernment on the timing of their child's participation.

Preparing a child

How wonderful it is when the church and the family work together to prepare the child. One of the ideal times of year to emphasize teaching about communion is at Easter when Christ's sacrifice is front and centre. Here are some suggested steps that can help the preparation.

1. Have children present so they can observe the Lord's Supper

In many churches children are never in attendance during this celebration. Even if they have been in the worship service they may be dismissed before communion. The first step in preparation for the child is to have them present to watch communion.

Be creative in thinking about how children can be present. For example, the order of service can be changed on a special Sunday so communion comes earlier in the service. Or children can be brought back into the service or be invited to stay for the whole service. On this occasion, the use of child friendly language is advantageous, giving simple explanations of the process and elements.

'Watching' will often provoke questions in the child's mind which provide a great teaching moment as the parent or leader takes the time to answer. As well, as the child observes, they will sense the significance of the event and will understand that this isn't just a 'snack time'.

Note: When children are present in a communion service, it is important for the child to sit with their family rather than with a group of children from their class. This affirms for everyone that the decision for 'if and when' the child is to take communion rests with the family.

2. Organize child-friendly, systematic teaching in the Sunday School

Some curriculum products provide lesson plans about the meaning and symbolism of communion. It may include a series of lessons on the Passover and the Last Supper which help leaders present it comprehensively and for different age levels. Inviting a pastor or elder to join the Sunday School to talk about communion and answer questions from the children is also helpful.

At the end of this article I have listed three short videos that can help children in learning this topic.

3. The church provides resources to parents to teach their child about communion

There are often 'parent helps' included in the curriculum that can be used to reinforce what the children have learned. If these aren't provided, it is helpful for the leaders to inform the parents what was taught.

In a later section of this article, there are some teaching ideas that could be used at home.

4. Parents and church leaders work together to plan a date for a ‘first communion’

Parents are involved in deciding if their child is ready to participate. Though it is not in the Baptist tradition to celebrate a ‘first communion’, the date that a child does participate with the community in taking the Lord’s Supper for the first time is a reason to celebrate and remind the child of the joy and importance of the day.

Some ideas about how to talk to your child at home about the Lord’s Supper

Christian education is very much a process. As reflected in Deuteronomy 6:4-9, teaching about God’s work, (including the participation in the Lord’s Supper) can happen at any time of the day when life and conversation are shared between parent and child.

The LORD our God, the LORD is one.⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. ⁶ And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. ⁷ You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. ⁸ You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. ⁹ You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (ESV)

In everyday life, look for ordinary things that will illustrate aspects of the Lord’s Supper to your child.

Here are a few ideas that can be used in the process.

1. Review the story by reading the Bible

Read Luke 22:7-20 together in a child friendly Bible such as NIRV.

In simple words, explain the elements of the Lord’s Supper.

For example: This passage describes what we call the Last Supper and is when Jesus had a final meal with his disciples before he died on the cross. Jesus told the disciples he wanted them to remember him by having a similar meal together. This included some bread – to remind them of what Jesus said: “This is my body. It is given for you. Every time you eat it, do this in memory of me.”

After he held the bread up and talked about it, he then took his cup and held it up saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Every time you drink it, do it in memory of me.” This new covenant is a new agreement between God and his people that is confirmed with Jesus’ blood.

We follow what Jesus said, eating and drinking to remember him, just as he asked his disciples to do.

2. To emphasize the aspect of this being a remembrance of Jesus

Make bread dough or purchase some pre-made dough from the dairy section of the grocery store. Together cut the dough into pieces and bake it while talking about the symbolism that Jesus used while he presented bread to the disciples at the Last Supper. When eating the bread with your family during a meal, continue the conversation about Christ's body given for us and the richness of 'feasting' on His word to nurture us.

Have each family member bring a photo or an item that reminds them of a person in their lives. Perhaps the person has moved away and the photos remind them of the times they had together. Or the person may have died and the items they gave are precious as a reminder of them. Just as we know the person is not here, these things help us remember them. The Lord's Supper is like that, the bread and the juice are not actually Jesus' body and blood but they represent His death to us and help us to remember.

3. To emphasize the aspect of symbolism in the Lord's Supper

Together with your child draw a family crest. On it you may put things that are important to you. It may be in the form of a photo, a drawing, or words. Talk with the child about how these things are not the actual item or experience. They are symbols to represent the actual item or event. For example, a photo of a zebra represents a trip to the zoo but is not the zoo itself. Or a sports logo represents a team. The Lord's Supper is like that, the bread and the juice are not actually Jesus' body and blood but they represent His body and blood to us and help us to remember.

4. Being a Christ Follower / Disciple of Jesus

When we take the Lord's Supper it is an outward expression of our belief in Jesus and our decision to follow Him in all parts of our lives.

Parents, share with your child the story of your own journey to Christ and becoming a Christ follower. Reflect on experiences of taking communion that stand out in your memory.

5. Sharing in community

With your child cut out paper doll figures. Draw symbols of the Lord's Supper (the cup, the bread) in the center of a piece of paper. Paste the connected paper dolls around the symbols to represent communion taken in your church community. Talk about: belonging to our own families and to God's family; How do you show that you belong to a group?

6. Follow-up after visiting a service

Once there is opportunity to visit or participate in a communion service, talk about what happened: how did it feel? did you sense Christ's presence? what was it like to participate with others from the church? did it compare to having a meal at home with family?

It is hoped that some of this information is helpful in bringing children to the Lord's Supper with understanding and respect. "This We Believe" statement from the CBOQ website says, "In breaking bread and drinking wine Jesus told us to remember him. In this action, called the Lord's Supper, or Communion, Christ offers himself to us and we present ourselves to him in worship and adoration". (<http://baptist.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/This-We-Believe.pdf>)

May our children remember Jesus and present themselves to him in worship and adoration as they partake in the Lord's Supper.

Other Resources for Teaching Children About Communion

Here is a list of a few other resources available for lessons in the church context. Included are some helpful videos for children to watch to better understand the concepts.

'Kidmin tools' - A helpful article gives five things to teach when explaining communion to children.

<http://www.kidmintools.com/2015/03/13/how-to-explain-communion-to-children/>

Videos:

'Dot and Bouncy' cartoon video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kOB88AwwMVI>

'What's in the Bible' explanation https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=utpt5S_bHrs

God's Story: The Last Supper- Crossroads Kid's Club

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wYAVu4MR7rc>

Additional Resources:

Canadian Baptists of Ontario and Quebec This is what we believe <http://baptist.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/This-We-Believe.pdf>

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<https://www.crcna.org/FaithFormation/toolkits/welcoming-children-lords-supper-toolkit>

Matt McCauley, Should My Child Take Communion; <http://www.tvcreources.net/resource-library/articles/should-my-child-take-communion?nav=m-44609&wildcard=/the-village-blog/should-my-child-take-communion/>

Explaining The Lord's Supper (Communion) to Children https://hubpages.com/religion-philosophy/Lords_Supper_For_Children

When Should Your Child Take Communion? By Bryan Dwyer;
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6NI_S4b3IQU