

A GUIDE FOR CONGREGATIONS

A PLACE

WELCOMING CHILDREN TO THE LORD'S SUPPER

AT THE TABLE



THEA NYHOFF LEUNK

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Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Faith Alive thanks Jessie Schut for collecting stories and testimonies from a number of people reflecting on their understanding and experiences of the Lord's Supper. These stories were originally published in issue 48 of *Reformed Worship*, a resource journal for worship planners and pastors.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1990s the Christian Reformed Church has been discussing whether to invite baptized children to participate in the Lord's Supper. Over the last five years, the synodically appointed Faith Formation Committee has led the CRC through a helpful and thorough process of learning and discernment on this issue. During that time, the committee has produced several comprehensive synodical study reports written in dialogue with individuals, congregations, and classes.

Synod 2011 adopted the Faith Formation Committee's recommendation to open the Lord's table to baptized children, including those who have not yet made a public profession of faith. Since this involves some substantial rethinking and changes in long-standing practices on the part of congregations, Faith Alive, in cooperation with the Faith Formation Committee, offers this study guide for churches.

This three-session study will help your congregation engage the main biblical and theological questions surrounding the issue, and envision how you might put synod's proposed changes into practice.

This study guide can be used by adult education classes, parent classes, intergenerational groups of adults and teens, or other interested people.

Video segments that accompany this study feature Rev. Leonard Vander Zee, an ordained minister in the Christian Reformed Church, and Sue Rozeboom, assistant professor of liturgical theology at Western Theological Seminary.

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

FORMAT

For this study you'll need a study guide for each person or couple, and one copy of the accompanying DVD, which contains introductory video segments. You'll also need a few other materials listed below in the "materials" section.

This study is divided into three sessions. Begin each session by opening with prayer, asking the introductory questions provided, and then watching a video segment to introduce the topic of discussion.

If your group can't complete a particular session in one meeting time (there's lots to discuss!), that's fine. Feel free to divide the session as needed and extend the study.

At the end of each session you'll find a section called "Perspectives." Feel free to read these personal stories after the session or use them as the basis for additional discussion questions.

LEADERS

Although this study does not require a leader, having a designated leader or facilitator for each session is helpful. No homework is required of participants before each session, but the leader should review the material in advance and read the leader notes in Appendix A.

MATERIALS

Bibles: Provide Bibles for participants to use, or ask them to bring a Bible to each session.

Agenda for Synod 2011: Each session refers to parts of the Faith Formation Committee's synodical report (page references are

noted for you). The full report of the Faith Formation Committee can be found in the *Agenda for Synod 2011* (pp. 541-621) or on the Faith Formation Committee website (www.crcna/faithformation.org). This report includes the revised 2010 report of the study committee to Synod (see Appendix C). Synod 2011's actions in response to this report are recorded in the *Acts of Synod 2011*, pages 829-830.

SESSION I

AFFIRMING OUR

BAPTISMAL IDENTITY

Sections of the Faith Formation Committee report covered in this session:

- *Agenda for Synod 2011*, Appendix A (Affirming Baptism and Forming Faith, p. 550ff): Intro and key themes
- Prologue
- Part 1: Baptismal Identity (p. 552ff)
- Part 4: The Lord’s Supper as Sign and Seal of God’s Grace (p. 564ff)
- *Agenda for Synod 2011*, Appendix C (“Children at the Table: Toward a Guiding Principle for Biblically Faithful Celebrations of the Lord’s Supper,” Revised Edition, p. 577ff)

GETTING STARTED

After opening with prayer, introduce yourselves to each other and share what you remember or have been told about your own baptism. If time permits, tell a bit about the first time you participated in the Lord’s Supper. Did that happen before or after you made a public profession of faith?

The Christian Reformed Church, like many other churches in the Reformed tradition, has long required a public profession of faith before participation in the Lord’s Supper. Over the past several years, however, we’ve come to a different understanding about who should be invited to participate—and we’ve recently broadened the invitation to include all those who are baptized.

Watch the video presentation for Session 1 together as you prepare to talk about the meaning of our identity in Christ through our baptism.

DISCUSSION: OUR BAPTISMAL IDENTITY IN CHRIST

1. Even if we don't celebrate the sacraments of the Lord's Supper or baptism each week, the presence of the font and table in the sanctuary remind us of our identity in Christ through these two important means of God's grace. Describe your own sense of identity as a child of God. What practices in your life have helped strengthen that sense of identity? What is the greatest challenge to your sense of identity in Christ from day to day?

2. Read Matthew 3:13-17 and Acts 16:25-34. What methods of baptism are described in these texts? What other kinds of baptisms have you witnessed or participated in? Is one way of baptism more correct than another? What does your church include to make the celebration of baptism unique for your congregation?

Baptismal identity: Our primary identity is found in our union with Christ through the Holy Spirit. Our faith journey is a lifelong process of deepening our understanding of what it means to be God's children, united to Christ. Since baptism points us to our ultimate identity in Christ, this identity should shape our habits, our piety, and our daily life.

3. Read Acts 2:43-47. What things did the early church begin to do almost immediately after the baptisms at Pentecost? Looking at these verses, what seems most important about the way we eat and drink together?

Note that this breaking of bread occurred in people's homes, since the members of the early church didn't have separate buildings in which to worship. How might we recreate that sense of "table fellowship" in our celebration of the Lord's Supper?

To read more about what the New Testament teaches about baptism, look up these texts:

- Acts 2:38 and 22:16
- Romans 6:4
- Colossians 2:11-12
- 1 Peter 3:21-22
- Ephesians 1:13 and 4:5
- 1 Corinthians 1:13 and 12:13

Which images of baptism seem fresh and new to you?

4. When we come to the Lord's table, we confess that at our baptisms God adopted us in Christ. This is our baptismal identity—the single most important way we can describe ourselves. Like any good and loving parent, God wants to see us grow up healthy and strong. So God feeds us with the loaf and the cup to help us flourish in Christ. Share with the group how observing the sacrament of baptism helps your faith grow. How does participating in the sacrament of communion help you express your faith?

5. Has the way your church celebrates the sacraments of baptism and communion changed over the past decade? Describe the changes you've seen. Why do you think these changes occurred? Have the changes contributed to a deeper, more meaningful celebration of the sacraments? What other changes might help you celebrate these sacraments with more attention to their meaning and purpose? What would you like the next generation to remember about what you did to enrich the sacramental life of your congregation?

Sacrament: The word “sacrament” does not appear in the Bible. It comes from the Latin word *sacramen-tum*, meaning an oath or a pledge. It was a translation of the Greek word *mysterion*, or “mystery.” The early church referred to our new life in Christ as “the great mystery”—a mystery we enter through our baptism and celebrate in the Lord’s Supper. The Heidelberg Catechism defines the sacraments this way: “Sacraments are visible, holy signs and seals. They were instituted by God so that by our use of them he might make us understand more clearly the promise of the gospel, and seal that promise” (Q&A 66).

FOR ADDITIONAL REFLECTION

The Worship Sourcebook (published by Faith Alive) highlights four important facets of the sacrament of baptism:

- *Baptism is a celebration of God’s grace, not of human achievement.* It is a means of grace through which God acts to seal the promises of the gospel.
- *Baptism is not an end in itself.* It always points beyond itself to celebrate God’s grace and covenant faithfulness. At the same time, baptism is not incidental or unimportant to

God's people. It should be a celebration fitting to the abundant grace of God offered in Christ.

- *Baptism is a sign of a covenant relationship.* Our relationship with God in Christ is based on God's promises to us, and baptism conveys these promises to us.
- *Baptism is deeply personal but never private.* It is a communal action of the gathered congregation which represents the church in all times and places.

(p. 249ff)

How does your church celebrate God's gracious work through baptism? What benefit might there be for children and adults if we become more intentional about making baptism a grand celebration?

How does your congregation live out its vows, made as a covenant community, to infants and adults at their baptism?

How does your communal baptismal identity affect who you are as a congregation and how you engage in doing God's work in this world?

What perceptions about baptism has this session reinforced or reshaped for you?

CLOSING

Conclude your time together with this prayer from *Sing! A New Creation* (p. 240):

Leader: The Lord be with you.

All: And also with you.

Leader: Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

All: It is right to give our thanks and praise.

Leader: We give you thanks, O holy and gracious God, for the gift of water. In the beginning of creation your Spirit moved over the waters.

In the waters of the flood you destroyed evil.

You led the children of Israel through the sea into the freedom of the promised land.

In the river Jordan, John baptized our Lord and your Spirit anointed him.

By his death and resurrection Jesus Christ, the living water, frees us from sin and death and opens the way to life everlasting.

**All: We have put on Christ. In him we have been baptized.
Alleluia! Alleluia!**

Leader: We thank you, O God, for the gift of baptism.

In the waters of baptism you confirm to us that we are buried with Christ in his death, raised to share in his resurrection, and being renewed by the Holy Spirit.

**All: We have put on Christ. In him we have been baptized.
Alleluia! Alleluia!**

Leader: Pour out upon us and on your whole church the gift of your Holy Spirit, so that all who have passed through the waters of baptism might be dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

**All: We have put on Christ. In him we have been baptized.
Alleluia! Alleluia!**

Leader: To God be all honor and glory, dominion and power, now and forever, through Jesus Christ our Lord, in whose name we are bold to pray.

Amen.

PERSPECTIVES

FROM AN ELEVEN-YEAR-OLD GIRL:

We used to belong to a church where there were no rules about children going to the Lord's Supper. If you believed in Jesus, and your parents allowed you to, you could take communion. I started taking communion when I was about seven or eight.

When we moved to this city, we started going to a church where we couldn't take communion anymore. We were kind of disappointed. Then my mom told me our church was thinking about letting children take the bread and the wine. I looked in the Bible and I found some verses about kids, so I told the church leaders to think about these verses when they decide about it. These are the verses: Matthew 11:25: "At that time Jesus said, 'I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children,'" and also Matthew 18:3: "And he said: 'I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.'"

FROM AN EIGHTY-TWO-YEAR OLD MAN:

My wife and I did not become professing members of a church until we were in our mid-twenties. When we did become members, we knew what it was all about, and it meant a lot to us.

Last summer we were in a church where children were allowed to participate in the Lord's Supper. One boy lifted his glass and

said, “Cheers!” He really didn’t know what communion was all about.

Still, if children know what it means, they should be there. After all, the Lord’s Supper is for those who love Jesus, who believe that Jesus shed his blood for the forgiveness of their sins. It’s really very simple.

FROM A PASTOR:

Sometimes my experiences with the Lord’s Supper seem so ordinary. But other times the experiences have been profound—I can remember distinctly some of the places where I was standing and the people I was with. The Lord’s Supper connects you with other Christians in very special ways.

For instance, I was once part of a group of pastors and other church leaders at a conference attended by all kinds of people from all over, including a large contingent of Korean Christians. At the end of the conference, we participated in a service of communion. It was very moving for me to be part of a community of believers from all over the world.

I took part of my education at an old, ivy-covered Anglican college at a secular university. At the chapel services there, we would have communion. The setting made me very aware of the long string of history connecting me to other Christians. It was almost as though Oliver Cromwell were kneeling beside me. Those experiences of the Lord’s Supper are really a means of grace, reminding me of the greatness and vastness of God’s kingdom.

The decision of Synod 2011 to open the Lord's table to baptized children marked a momentous change in the practice of the Christian Reformed Church. But implementing that decision requires study, discussion, and thoughtful planning.

This video-based study helps churches reflect on and discuss how to best welcome children to the celebration of the sacrament of communion. It's divided into three sessions:

- Session 1: Affirming Our Baptismal Identity
- Session 2: Participating in the Lord's Supper
- Session 3: Professing Our Faith

Your church can use this study in adult education classes, small groups, parent classes, intergenerational groups, and more. It's also helpful for personal reading and reflection.

Thea Nyhoff Leunk is pastor of Eastern Avenue CRC in Grand Rapids, Michigan, a congregation that has eagerly opened the table to its members who are children. She is currently serving as chair of the CRC Classis Renewal Ministry Team and as U.S. pastoral advisor to the board of World Renew (CRWRC).



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