

Memo

To: Worship Ministry Team
Session – Kirk of the Hills Presbyterian Church

From: Children's Ministry Nurture Team

Date:

Re: **The Question of Communicant Status of Covenant Children**

As the *Presbyterian Church in America* continues to grow and diversify into the next millennium, she is faced with many questions that need to be answered on a consistent basis. One of these issues involves the *technical membership* (Communicant Status) of children in the local church. As our churches grow the status of children differs greatly from place to place. This lack of unity leads to confusion and questions for children and their families on their standing in the church on such issues as their taking communion and their transfer to other PCA churches. This paper is meant to help clarify and propose a unified standard for the status of children in the church concerning their technical church membership.

WHAT IS NOT BEING DISCUSSED

This paper is *not* questioning the status of baptized children in the eyes of the church. Our standards are very clear on their relationship to the church. We read in the Westminster Larger Catechism (q165):

What is Baptism?

Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament, wherein Christ has ordained the washing with water in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, to be a sign and seal of engrafting into Himself, of remission of sins by His blood, and regeneration by His Spirit; of adoption, and resurrection unto everlasting life; and whereby the parties baptized are solemnly admitted into the visible church, and enter into an open and professed engagement to be wholly and only the Lord's.

And further in the Westminster Confession of Faith (XXV,2):

The visible church, which is also catholic or universal under the gospel, (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, together with their children; and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.

WHAT IS BEING DISCUSSED

The question that arises is at what point the child is eligible for *technical church membership* (i.e., *Communicant Status Membership*), and therefore entitled to the rights and privileges of the church, namely communion. At this, question churches vary greatly. Some churches propose a *Communicant's Class* when a child reaches a certain age or grade, others propose when a child is able to give a credible testimony, still others develop an intermediate stage of membership by writing in a voting age to their church bylaws. The point is that there is no clear position within the PCA on this question. We, of all denominations, with our covenantal theology should understand the proper relationship of the children and the church.

KEY REFERENCES

In discussing this issue the following passages are referenced:

1 Cor 11:20-34

When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you for this? Certainly not! For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, 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." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world. So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for each other. If anyone is hungry, he should eat at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment. And when I come I will give further instructions.

Luke 22:19-20

And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you."

Rom 10:9-10

That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.

The pertinent parts of our Confessional Standards read:

SC Q. 97. What is required for the worthy receiving of the Lord's Supper?

A. It is required of them that would worthily partake of the Lord's Supper, that they examine themselves of their knowledge to discern the Lord's body, of their faith to feed upon him, of their repentance, love, and new obedience; lest, coming unworthily, they eat and drink judgment to themselves [a].

[a]. I Cor. 11:27-32

WCF XXVII 7. Worthy receivers, outwardly partaking of the visible elements, in this sacrament,[n] do then also, inwardly by faith, really and indeed, yet not carnally and corporally but spiritually, receive, and feed upon, Christ crucified, and all benefits of his death: the body and blood of Christ being then, not corporally or carnally, in, with, or under the bread and wine; yet, as really, but spiritually, present to the faith of believers in that ordinance, as the elements themselves are to their outward senses.[o]

[n]. I Cor. 11:28

[o]. I Cor. 10:16; see I Cor. 10:3-4

The pertinent parts of our Book of Church Order:

57-1. Believers' children within the visible Church, and especially those dedicated to God in Baptism, are non-communing members under the care of the church. They are to be taught to love God, and to obey and serve the Lord Jesus Christ. When they are able to understand the Gospel, they should be earnestly reminded that they are members of the church by birthright, and that it is their duty and privilege personally to accept Christ, to confess Him before men, and to seek admission to the Lord's Supper.

57-2. The time when young persons come to understand the Gospel cannot be precisely fixed. This must be left to the prudence of the Session, whose office it is to judge, after careful examination, the qualifications of those who apply for admission to sealing ordinances.

57-4. It is recommended, as edifying and proper, that baptized persons, when admitted by the Session to the Lord's Supper, make a public profession of their faith in the presence of the congregation. But in all cases, there should be a clear recognition of their previous relation to the church as baptized members

PROPOSAL

It is our proposal that the criteria for allowing a child to become a communicant member of the church should be based on that child's ability to give a credible profession of faith as they desire to partake of the Sacrament.

QUESTIONS TO BE ASKED

This position is not without its critics, and several legitimate questions are raised concerning admitting of children to the Table.

1. "Can children have a saving faith?" What is the nature of faith?
2. What is the BCO's requirements for communicant membership and the child?
3. Can a child assume the responsibilities of church membership?
4. Can we as a church track their lives to see if they are continuing in the Christian walk?
5. What do we do about their right as members to vote?
6. How do we handle the pressure that may be placed on the children by their parents to, "be like everyone else"?
7. Can we turn away the child of a minister if their profession of faith is not strong enough?
8. How do we discern between what is "heart felt" and what is learned by rote when it comes to salvation?
9. What do we do if a child, once confirmed as a member of our congregation, denounces his faith as a teen or adult?
10. What if children take the sacraments in a wrong manner? Do we bring further judgement upon them?
11. Do we as a church open the door for children to bring condemnation upon themselves if they do not understand the sacraments?
12. Parents will put pressure on their children to keep up with the spiritually advanced children
13. Tradition suggests that lowering the age means that what has been done in the past was wrong
14. Having children become members at different times suggest disorder in the procedure rather than "all things being done decently and in order"
15. The early age candidates for membership put undue pressure on the evaluating officers to "pass" the candidate
16. Early age membership will become a status symbol, if not for the child, for the parent

17. Membership at different ages will make it difficult, if not impossible, for elders to monitor communion taken by children who have not yet been examined
18. An orderly society has rules for ages of schooling, voting, drinking, driving, and military service. So too should church membership
19. Granting early age for membership "cheapens" the value of waiting in anticipation for that which is so valuable

QUESTIONS ANSWERED

1. What is the Nature of Faith?

What does the Bible mean by the term *faith*?

Scripture speaks of faith in three different but interacting ways. A proper theological understanding of spiritual maturity includes each of these aspects of faith: the cognitive, the affective, and the volitional.

COGNITIVE

Faith has an intellectual (*notitia*) or cognitive aspect. There is an element of knowledge or content to faith. Scripture affirms that faith means believing certain things are true. There is a content to be believed, and that content has specifics. For example, In 1 Thessalonians 4:14 Paul says, "We believe that Jesus died and rose again," and John 20:31 declares that the purpose of the Gospel is "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God . . ."

Faith is more than a frothy hope that has no substance. The popular notion that "you gotta believe" is far removed from the biblical teaching that true faith has as its object the living God and his word revealed in Scripture. It is not enough that people have faith. *What* they believe is every bit as critical as the fact *that* they believe.

For some Christians, content is replaced with form. The experience of faith is more critical than the content of faith. People are deemed to be Christian simply because they can say, "I believe." There seems to be little concern over what the content of that belief happens to be. But the Bible stresses that *what* a person believes does matter. For example, both Romans and Galatians were written to inform or correct the *content* of the belief of the readers. Theology does matter, and what a person believes is important.

If educational ministries are to help people grow in faith, we must be concerned to communicate the content of the faith. Part of spiritual maturity is knowledge of God and knowledge of his Word. It is impossible to be spiritually mature and yet be ignorant of the truths of God's Word. Spiritual maturity is contingent upon knowing what God has said.

Orthodox belief holds to correct content of faith, beliefs that have been identified and described by the various church councils down through history. Heresy is holding to beliefs that are not orthodox. Evangelicals must continue to be concerned for orthodoxy. We must be equally concerned for both the face of faith and the content of faith.

A rediscovery of theology will help guard against Christian education that is not concerned with content and may therefore inadvertently introduce heresy into the church. A Christian education ministry that helps people grow in faith will be concerned with teaching and content of the faith accurately.

RELATIONAL

The Bible also speaks of faith as emotional (*assensus*) or relational. The epistle of James warns against the dangers of having a faith that is only content and tells us that orthodoxy alone is not sufficient. The content being believed must also capture the believer's heart and will.

True faith causes us to assent to the truthfulness of the object of faith and to have our hearts controlled. The Bible describes this as *believing in* God or *in* Jesus. This linguistic construction (*pisteuo eis*) is unique to the New Testament, implying a different kind of belief from the traditional Hellenistic notion that separated belief from commitment.

John 1:12 refers to “those who believed in his name.” In Galatians 2:16 Paul says, “We, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus.” Thus “belief in” goes beyond the intellectual aspects of belief and calls for a belief that carries an emotional commitment to the object of one’s faith.

The greatest commandment is that we love the Lord our God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our strength (Deut. 6:5). This requires a faith that is relational and alive toward God, not a dispassionate intellectualism. What a person believes is important, but heart commitment is equally important. The mature believer will have a heart that loves God, delights in knowing him, and desires to please him in every way. It is not possible to speak of Christian maturity apart from these qualities of the heart.

Educational ministries that help people grow in faith must help people turn their hearts toward God. They must not only *understand* the truth but also *be captured* by the truth. Faith means a commitment to the truth of God and a heart that delights in the truth. The distinction between content and emotion in faith is the distinction between passive and active belief. The church must teach so that people actively embrace the Gospel as true and meaningful to their lives.

VOLITIONAL

The Bible also speaks of faith as volitional (*fiducia*). This final, crowning element of faith translates into lifestyle. True faith causes people to act on what they believe, engaging not only heart and mind, but also the will. Our Lord taught, “If you love me, you will obey what I command” (John 14:15). The outcome of saving faith is obedience to God. The ultimate test that one’s faith is real is it being expressed by good works.

In an effort to protect the doctrine of justification by faith alone, some people have misunderstood the nature of faith, removing from it any understanding of or inclusion of works. But no one is ever justified by a faith that stands alone, apart from good works. Ephesians 2:8-9 teaches that salvation is by grace alone. But verse 10 stresses that “we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” Our Lord warned that if our faith is not being expressed in obedience, it is not true faith at all (Matt. 7:21-23).

People cannot truthfully say they believe in Jesus unless they have a commitment to him that translates into active obedience. Part of loving God is a desire to please him by obedience. Paul described his ministry as calling people “to the obedience that comes from faith” (Rom. 1:5). True biblical faith ultimately affects the will, causing a person to desire to obey God. The process of sanctification is learning to become increasingly obedient to the Lord. Faith that justifies must have an aspect of this desire for obedience resident within it. James tells us emphatically that “as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead” (James 2:26).¹

With this understanding of the nature of faith, we assert that God calls his covenant people, young and old, to respond to his gracious invitation by confessing his name. We agree (with a publication from the CRC church) that an act of faith on the part of those participating is required before a child becomes a Communicant Member. We list the following texts in support of the position:

1. I Corinthians 11:23-29 tells us that those who participate in the Lord’s Supper must do so in *remembrance* of him. Furthermore, by participating in this sacrament they *proclaim* Jesus’ death. Also, Paul urges the importance of *self-examination*, so that those who participate will not bring judgment on themselves. These three elements – remembering, proclaiming, and self-examination – are actions based on and requiring faith.
2. In John 6:35 Jesus declares, “I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.” Faith, however simple, is required of those who participate.

¹ Downs, Perry S., *Teaching for Spiritual Growth*, pp.17-19

3. Luke 22:19 records Jesus' command that we celebrate the Lord's Supper "in remembrance" of him. This confirms that when they participate, our children need to know what this covenant meal means.
4. An additional passage that is instructive in this context, is Romans 10:9. Paul tells us, "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Our good confession is a necessary fruit of God's saving work in us.

We believe that the consistent position in regard's a child's faith is best expressed in the statement that a 'child is to grow up a Christian, and never know himself as being otherwise. In other words, the aim, effort and expectation should be not, as is commonly assumed, that the child is to grow up in sin, to be converted after he comes to a mature age; but that he is to open on the world as one that is spiritually renewed, not remembering the time he went through a technical experience, but seeming rather to have loved what is good from his earliest years.'²

2. What are the BCO's requirements for church membership?

From our church standards we read:

57-1. Believers' children within the visible Church, and especially those dedicated to God in Baptism, are non-communing members under the care of the church. They are to be taught to love God, and to obey and serve the Lord Jesus Christ. **When they are able to understand the Gospel**, they should be earnestly reminded that they are members of the church by birthright, and that it is their duty and privilege personally to accept Christ, to confess Him before men, and to **seek admission** to the Lord's Supper.

57-2. The time when **young persons come to understand the Gospel cannot be precisely fixed**. This must be left to the prudence of the Session, whose office it is to judge, after careful examination, the qualifications of those who apply for admission to sealing ordinances.

The key phrases, in bold, in our church standards are found in these two paragraphs. It would appear that the BCO does indeed favor an understanding that Communicant membership should be granted on a credible profession, rather than a chronological age based criteria.

3. Can a child assume the responsibilities of church membership?

The following questions are asked of a person when they become a communing member of the church:

1. Do you acknowledge yourselves to be sinners in the sight of God, justly deserving His displeasure, and without hope save in His sovereign mercy?
2. Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and Savior of sinners, and do you receive and rest upon Him alone for salvation as He is offered in the Gospel?
3. Do you now resolve and promise, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, that you will endeavor to live as becomes the followers of Christ?
4. Do you promise to support the church in its worship and work to the best of your ability?
5. Do you submit yourselves to the government and discipline of the church, and promise to study its purity and peace?

² Horace Bushnell, Christian Nurture (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 10.

Can a child fulfil these responsibilities? Yes, by understanding that a child responds at his development level. These questions revolve around a basic understanding of the gospel, the process of sanctification, using your gifts in the local church, and submitting yourself to the church leadership. This is the process of Christian Education.

In a very real sense, one cannot learn to be a Christian. Being a Christian requires God's supernatural work of regeneration and his gracious gift of faith for salvation. But in another sense we must teach our children to follow the Lord and in that sense to be Christians. Christian education is both a natural and a supernatural enterprise.

Christianity has a content to be believed and a worldview to be acquired. Part of teaching children is to provide them with a Christian perspective on life and the realities in which we all live. For the Christian parent and church, there are several foundational realities that should be learned through the example and direct teaching of adults. Included in these realities are critical concerns about God, our relation to him, and our relation with other Christians.³

4. Can we as a church track their lives to see if they are continuing in the Christian walk?

Our responsibility as a church can be seen in our Confessional Standards (WCF XXV:3) which reads,

Unto this catholic visible church Christ hath given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints, in this life, to the end of the world: and doth, by his own presence and Spirit, according to his promise, make them effectual thereunto.

Our responsibility is to for the *gathering and perfecting of the saints* be they adults or children. Simply because a member is a child does not lessen, or heighten, the responsibility of the church.

5. What do we do about their right as members to vote?

An individual does not ordinarily become proficient in matters of church polity when he or she makes a credible profession of faith. Nor would the BCO lead one to believe such to be the case. This is particularly so with regard to children. Nevertheless, many churches grant admission to the Table and voting rights at the same time. In these instances, it is incumbent upon the parents or other mentors of communing member children to encourage them to abstain from voting in congregational meetings until they reach a more mature age. Some churches have set a stated age at which a communing member may become eligible to vote. Each particular church is free to set its own policy in their By-laws on this matter. In all cases, however, we believe that the granting of membership to a child who makes a credible profession of faith should not be abridged due to the question of voting rights.

6. How do we handle the pressure that may be placed on the children by their parents to, "be like everyone else"?

This issue can be addressed in the child's interview. Our experience is that if a child is not ready it is painfully obvious to the parent. If the parent insists, then the issue becomes one of addressing the parent's sin. An individual parent's sin should not deny the Sacrament to the children of the church who are ready.

7. Can we turn away the child of a minister if their profession of faith is not strong enough?

Absolutely, if a person's profession of faith is not strong enough, they should not be permitted to be members of our church, whether they are an adult or child.

8. How do we discern between what is "heart felt" and what is learned by rote when it comes to salvation?

Only by a discernment that comes from God. By placing these matters in His hands, and

³ Downs, p. 146

praying for His guidance, He will show us the truth. Examination, preceded by prayer will place this in God's hands.

9. What do we do if a child, once confirmed as a member of our congregation, denounces his faith as a teen or adult?

What do we do if anyone does? We believe that man is of a sinful nature and though we are forgiven, we are still sinful. We cannot lose our salvation and God always turns us back. This also falls under the Book of Church Order, under the "rules of discipline". He can be brought to task and placed under church discipline.

10. What if children take the sacrament in a wrong manner? Do we bring further judgement upon them?

Any Christian regardless of their age can come under the Lord's discipline. As Christians, we see this as a privilege, that God loves us enough to rebuke us and bring us back to His will.
Hebrews 12:5b-6 My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when He rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone He accepts as a son.

11. Do we as a church open the door for children to bring condemnation upon themselves if they do not understand the sacraments?

The question arises out of translations of 1 Cor 11:29 in which the Greek word *krima* is translated *condemnation* or *judgement*. Modern translations of the word prefer *judgement* rather than *condemnation*. (NIV, NAS, AS) A child's understanding of the sacraments is not the criteria of condemnation; salvation and condemnation are best understood in terms of a relationship or non-relationship to God. That relationship is based upon receiving Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior, *not* on their understanding of the sacraments. Therefore, we are not opening the door to condemnation to children.

12. Parents will put pressure on their children to keep up with the spiritually advanced children.

No, salvation is not reached through taking the Lord's Supper and salvation is not dependent on taking the Lord's Supper. It is a right of faithful worship that we as Christians hold dear. We partake in the Lord's Supper as we are commanded to do, and do it in the full knowledge of Christ's great sacrifice for us. By keeping a child who, fully realizes and understands his or her salvation, and can make a public profession of his or her faith, away from the communion table is to deny them the right to partake in one of our most cherished rights and privileges as Christians.

13. Tradition suggests that lowering the age means that what has been done in the past was wrong.

Part of our tradition is that we are always reforming to the Word of God. That implies that practices of the past may need to change as we bring Scripture to bear on an issue.

14. Having children become members at different times suggest disorder in the procedure rather than "all things being done decently and in order".

To allow children to become members of the church when they are able to give a credible profession of faith, does suggest that things are being done decently and in order according to the Bible. Not to allow children to become members until they reach a certain age goes against Biblical teaching, and therefore is not being done decently and in order.

15. The early age candidates for membership put undue pressure on the evaluating officers to "pass" the candidate.

It is the responsibility of the officers of the church in BCO 8-3, whether child or adult:

It belongs to the office of elder, both severally and jointly, to watch diligently over the flock committed to their charge, that no corruption of doctrine or of morals enter therein. They must exercise government and discipline, and take oversight not only of the spiritual interests of the particular church, but also the church generally when called thereunto. They should visit the people at their homes, especially the sick. They should instruct the ignorant, comfort the mourner, nourish and guard the children of the church. They should set a worthy example to the flock entrusted to their care by their zeal to evangelize the unconverted and make disciples. All those duties which private Christians are bound to discharge by the law of love are especially incumbent upon them by divine vocation, and are to be discharged as official duties. They should pray with and for the people, being careful and diligent in seeking the fruit of the preached Word among the flock.

- 16. Early age membership will become a status symbol, if not for the child, for the parent.**
See #6 and #12..
- 17. Membership at different ages will make it difficult, if not impossible, for elders to monitor communion taken by children who have not yet been examined.**

The responsibility of the officers will not change. They have the responsibility of monitoring the adults who take communion. Some are members, some are not, some are under discipline. The admission of children taking communion does not change their responsibility. If it really is difficult to monitor the people of the church taking communion, then perhaps we need to change the way we 'do' communion, not deny the professing children.

- 18. An orderly society has rules for ages of schooling, voting, drinking, driving, and military service. So too should church membership.**
We are proposing rules for membership. The child must be able to give a credible testimony.

- 19. Granting early age for membership "cheapens" the value of waiting in anticipation for that which is so valuable.**
The very fact that it is so valuable as a means of grace is the reason for admitting children to the Table. To deny admission to the Table based on man's tradition is to grant delayed recognition of the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the child who makes a credible profession of faith.

SUMMARY

Our position is that a child should be eligible for the status of *Communicant Status Member* based upon a credible testimony, not based upon their chronological age. No further additions need be made to the *Book of Church Order*, but rather acknowledge that this is the proper understanding of the pertinent chapters.