

"Why Can't I Have a 'Snack' Like Everyone Else?"

Thoughts on Children and the Lord's Supper

By David Michael January 1, 1995

Sooner or later, a child who is regularly sitting through a Sunday morning worship service is bound to ask something like, "Why can't I have a 'snack' like everyone else?" So it is not surprising that the second most-frequent question I am asked in children's ministry is, "When should my child take the Lord's Supper?" Since it is such a prevalent question, I have been encouraged me to write an article on the subject.

A General Response

When people inquire about children taking the Lord's Supper, I have two perspectives to share with them. The first is that our communion services are open to all present, including children, who are:

trusting in Jesus Christ alone for the forgiveness of their sins and the fulfillment of all his promises to us (including eternal life); and

who intend to follow him as Lord and obey his commandments.

Therefore, children are welcome to participate in the Lord's Supper:

when they can understand its significance;

when they are able to give a credible profession of faith in Christ;

and when they consciously intend to follow the Lord in obedience.

There is no test they take or class they attend to help establish their readiness. We simply leave it up to parents to decide when their young disciples are ready.

A Personal Response

My other response to this question is to share how Sally and I dealt with the issue for our two daughters. Our way is certainly not the only acceptable way to handle the issue. Other spiritually wise parents at Bethlehem, including some of my respected colleagues on the pastoral staff, have handled it differently. Nevertheless, I commend "our way" to you for your consideration as you lay out a path for your children.

When our girls were small, we explained that they would be able to fully participate in the Lord's Supper sometime after they were thirteen. Admittedly, this response was somewhat arbitrary and sounds a bit legalistic-but it was a simple response that they could grasp, and it was enough to settle the issue for them. There were, however, important reasons why we encouraged them to wait. I'd like to share six of them with you:

1. Wait for Understanding

Probably the most compelling reason for us came out of 1 Corinthians 11:27ff where Paul warns us of the perils of eating and drinking in an "unworthy manner." Though both of our girls confessed faith in Christ before their sixth birthday, we wanted them to be old enough to contemplate the significance of the Lord's Supper. We wanted them to understand the meaning of the ordinance and also have enough maturity to do the self-examination that Paul calls for in verse 28.

2. Wait for More Independent Thinking

We decided that they should come to the Lord's Table after they were baptized, and we did not want them to be baptized before age thirteen. The main reason for this is that children are thinking more independently as they enter the teen years and therefore are more likely to embrace the decisions and commitments they make as their own. Our pre-teen decisions and commitments are often suspect in our minds as we get older. They are suspect in that we barely connect with the reason why we made the commitment.

At age seven I have a very vague memory of raising my hand in Sunday school and indicating a desire to follow Jesus. I remember sitting on the bed with my Mom, praying and writing the date of my conversion into my Bible. I am at a loss to tell you, however, what it was that was so compelling to me. I don't know if I understood what I was doing. I simply have no recollection now -neither did I have it when I was thirteen. Without that recollection it was difficult to have confidence in the decision I made. This is probably why I felt a need to "accept Jesus into my heart" again during my teen years.

It is not uncommon for those who were baptized during their pre-teen years to feel a need to be "re-baptized" when they are older. Therefore, it made sense for us to encourage our children to hold off on baptism until a time when it would be more meaningful to them-when they could more fully embrace the commitment behind this public declaration of faith.

Although we do not believe baptism must necessarily precede participation in the Lord's Supper, it seemed more natural for our children to join the Lord at his table after they followed the Lord in the obedience of baptism. Since we planned for our girls to wait until at least age thirteen to be baptized, it followed that they would also need to wait until then to take the Lord's Supper.

3. Wait for Significance

Even though our girls would have "qualified" for baptism and the Lord's Supper at an earlier age, we believe that waiting helped to impress on them the significance of these ordinances and the unspeakable privilege it is to participate in them.

4. Wait for Anticipation

Each time the tray passed them by, they could look forward to the day when they would join in this celebration. I believe that this period of anticipation made their first and subsequent experiences at the table sweeter and more meaningful to them.

5. Wait for Memories

We wanted our girls to remember their first experience at the Lord's Table. Memories of the first decade of our lives are often fuzzy at best. Therefore, it made sense for them to wait until a time when they would more likely remember the experience.

6. Wait for Maturity

There is nothing particularly significant about age thirteen. We could have easily picked age eleven or twelve or fourteen. Sally and I simply wanted to draw a very clear line for our girls that would mark a definite transition out of childhood into young adulthood. As arbitrary as it may seem, we have seen tremendous value in having a tangible point where we begin to place certain expectations and to offer certain privileges that are associated with maturity. Hopefully I have said enough for you to understand why we chose to save the significance of the Lord's Table for the other side of the line.

Even though we may ask our children to wait for a season before they fully participate in the Lord's Supper, it can still be a significant experience for them in their pre-teen years. We should not wait to teach them about the meaning of the celebration and how to examine themselves, confess their sins, and remember the Lord's death until he comes.

My aim in writing this article is not to have all our children going through the proper religious motions at the "perfect" time (whenever that is). My aim and earnest prayer is that our children will know the sweet fellowship with the living Christ and experience his life-changing, soul-satisfying work in their hearts. May the Lord use our efforts in preparing our children for his table to nudge them into closer fellowship with him.

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