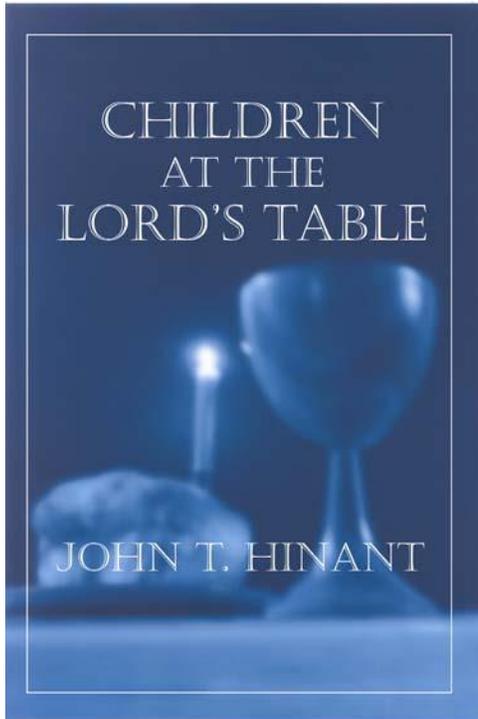


Introduction to Study Guide

By Amy Taylor



Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." Matthew 19:14

Children and families welcome here! Hopefully all churches share this value. Yet it is a well known fact that many of our churches are not as good at communicating "welcome" as we like to think we are.

Today, many Disciples churches are examining the message they give to children and families and wondering how they might become more welcoming and inclusive. A number of questions arise in this process. One question which we believe should arise — and which offers great potential as a means for welcoming children to God's house — is the question of communion.

Should unbaptized children be welcomed to the table? This is a controversial question for Disciples

congregations. Some people respond with a visceral, unequivocal opinion. Others think there should be room for diversity and choice.

Rev. John T. Hinant has summarized the significant history of this practice, as well as sharing recent survey data, in *Children at the Lord's Table*. It is important that every Disciples congregation have this conversation about whether or not unbaptized children can partake of the Lord's Supper.

The Office of Family and Children's Ministries wishes to be transparent here. We believe there is no theological or historical reason for Disciples churches not to welcome children, who are unbaptized, to communion; and churches should guide parents in that direction, while respecting the authority of parents to make this decision. However, respect for diversity and local congregational authority are fundamental principles of Disciples churches. Even though the Office of Family and Children's Ministries supports including not yet baptized children, the hope is that all Disciples congregations will read and discuss Hinant's book; decide for themselves what they believe and how to justify their beliefs — theologically, historically, and biblically; and, finally, act in accordance with their beliefs.

Deciding to study this controversial issue is no simple task. It requires a commitment to questioning, wondering, and seeking God's guidance. You are commended for your willingness to read and study *Children at the Lord's Table*.

Welcoming children to the Table is only one important aspect of a broad discussion about the place of children in the church. You may find this study leading you to consider other questions such as:

- How might we welcome and include children in all the many aspects of worship (sermon, music, prayer, and scripture) as well as other church activities and relationships?
- Does our congregation consider children as central or peripheral to the heart of the church?

Each of us was once a child. We bring our own personal histories of life as children into and out

of the church. How our parents, pastors, Sunday School teachers, and other adult leaders treated us in church shaped our experiences of church and, quite likely, of God. That's a weighty thing. Those of us called now to play the role of adult guide and role model face important challenges and opportunities that deserve considered thought, prayer, and action.

Please try to keep your own history, biases, and emotional responses to church as a child in mind as you read this book. Share your own stories and feelings when you feel called to do so. Only by digging deep can we understand what we are really bringing to the discussion and why.

Welcoming churches need to recognize that some children may not feel ready for the powerful experience of communion; children should never be required to participate against their will. Adults should respect children's sense of what is right for them and churches should respect parents' wishes. However, communion is a church issue and requires the guidance and vision of the whole congregation.

In summary, a thoughtful consideration of the history and practice of children and communion will lead individuals and groups to a deeper understanding of faith and its enactment in the church. It is hoped that this book and study guide will help your congregation make informed and considered decisions when it comes to the Lord's Supper.

Questions and Answers

Q: Who should study this book?

A: Ideally, this book will be read in groups that include church members and staff (including parents, elders, youth, and youth workers). Diverse, intergenerational groups would be wonderful, but established Sunday School or book study peer groups would also work well. While this issue may seem most relevant to parents of young children, the whole congregation needs to commit to the discussion of this issue. Many churches express the desire to attract young families. The conditions must be put in place so families will feel welcomed when they visit.

Q: How should we study this book?

A: There are many options, including Sunday school classes, mid-week book studies, or other small group gatherings. Suggested time is 45 minutes to one hour per session for about eight weeks. If possible, arrange chairs in a circle or around a table. If the group includes more than 15 – 20 people, it is suggested that you break into smaller groups for the discussion. Have the group come back together to share at the end of the session.

Q: This is an emotional issue for many people, how do we create a safe space in which diverse beliefs can be freely expressed?

A: It might be helpful to have the group create a written covenant which expresses the group's desire to be a safe space and establishes some group rules. A wisdom circle format may prove helpful during the discussion time. You can find out more about wisdom circles at: <http://www.wisdomcircle.org/>

Q: How can this book best be divided to facilitate group study?

A: A proposed outline follows. While it will probably be helpful to have a guide or facilitator, the group should be geared toward discussion and discernment rather than teaching. Participants should be encouraged to share their thoughts and concerns and listen to each other.

Proposed eight week course of study:

<u>Week</u>	<u>Section</u>	<u>Readings</u>
1	Introduction/Charge Part I	
2	History: Early Church and Favored Church	pp. 1-33
3	History: Divided Church Part II	pp. 33-51
4	Opening the Table	pp. 55-89
5	Education and Diversity	pp. 90-104
6	Questions of Discernment	pp. 105-127
7	Concluding/Discerning Session	
8	Planning/Recommendations Session	

Q: How should the group sessions go?

A: Again, a proposed outline follows. Feel free to add or change based on the needs of your gathering.

Session outline:

1. Open with a prayer evoking God's presence and guidance, such as:

Loving God, Your love for us, your children, gives us a guide for how we can love the children you've entrusted to us. We know they need discipline and mentoring, but above all they need our love and respect. They need forgiveness and prayers. They need to be welcomed to the church just as you welcome us to come to you. Help us as we seek to discern your will for children at your Table, and in all aspects of church life. Grant us the wisdom and compassion to light the way. In your name, we pray. Amen.

1. Facilitator gives his/her own summary which includes the study guide summary.
2. Facilitator guides dialogue using suggested discussion questions.
3. Conclude with a prayer, such as:

Loving God, Be with us as we leave this room and return to the community. Keep our eyes, hearts, and minds trained upon the children, so that, together, we might discover new ways to worship, pray, sing, dance, laugh, and mourn. Remind us we are here to love and to learn from each other. In your name, we pray. Amen.

Week One

Introduction/Charge

Begin with an opening prayer. Pass out books and a paper with the schedule, including relevant readings. Make a round of introductions. A simple icebreaker or question might help folks relax. Try one of these:

- Share a childhood memory or impression of church, whether or not you attended church.
- Name some of the gifts children bring to your life.

Discuss ways in which the group will make sure this is a safe space for everyone to express beliefs and feelings.

Do a role play of young children participating in a church activity from which they are normally excluded such as a worship service, a work day, a committee meeting. Discuss the reasons why children are usually excluded from these activities. In what ways do children impact activities in which they are included? How does the presence of children change the way adults relate to one another? What is negative about including children? What is positive about including children?

Suggested discussion questions about children's participation in communion:

- 1 What childhood memories, if any, do you have of communion? If you were excluded, how did you feel? If you were included, how did you feel?
- 2 When do you believe children should be welcomed to the Table? On what do you base this belief?
- 3 Is there a formal policy on children, not yet baptized, and communion at your church? If so, what is it? If not, is there an informal policy?
- 4 Do you think your congregation is welcoming to children and families? Why or why not?
- 5 Who do you believe should decide whether or not a child, not yet baptized, communes? Parent? Child? Pastor? Others?
- 6 What do you make of Jesus' instruction to the disciples to let the children come to him (*Mark 10:13-16*)?

Suggestions for things the participants can explore before the next session:

- 1 If you aren't sure about whether or not your church has a policy—formal or informal—about children and communion, share and discuss that issue at the next gathering.
- 2 Ask people of different ages what they remember thinking and feeling about communion as a child.
- 3 Ask a child what they know about the Lord's Supper and whether or not they have participated. If not, ask whether or not they would like to do so. An alternative would be to ask them to draw a picture of communion.

Remind participants of assigned reading for the next meeting.

End with prayer.

Week Two

Part I: History: Early Church and Favored Church

Read pp. 1-33

Begin with prayer. If anyone did explore the questions suggested at the end of the last session, ask them to share their findings.

Give your own summary of the assigned reading which includes the following:

Hinant begins with a reflection on the child-centered nature of Jewish culture at the time of Jesus, represented by the priority on education and respect for teachers. Religious education was not instruction about ritual but participation in ritual. Jesus and Jewish Christians shared this view with the Judaism out of which they grew.

The record of children's participation in the Lord's Supper between the death of the Apostle John and the Council of Nicea in 325 CE is sparse but the few references that do exist suggest that children's participation in the Lord's Supper was the norm with the *Apostolic Constitutions*, even providing specific instructions for children's place and role in the liturgy. Hinant cites a striking example from the writings of Cyprian of a young girl who was given communion but couldn't tolerate it. It was believed that her inability to partake was because she and her family were considered lapsed Christians who had eaten food sacrificed to idols.

During the next two centuries (4th and 5th), infant communion became universal with three of the greatest Church Fathers, Augustine, Jerome and Chrysostom declaring that the communion of infants was necessary for their salvation. During the first five centuries of the Middle Ages, commonly called the Dark Ages (6th through 10th), the communion of children continued with changes limited primarily to how the communion was to be administered to children and the frequency of their participation.

The first half of a new millennium (11th through 15th centuries) began with the division of Christendom into Eastern Orthodoxy and Western Catholicity. The Eastern Church continued its practice of infant communion but the Western Church, due to the developing doctrine of **the real presence** championed by Thomas Aquinas, began to withdraw communion from children. During these five centuries the principal task was to revise ecclesiastical history to show that communion for infants and children was not necessary and to determine when children should receive their first communion and under what circumstances. By the time of the Protestant Reformation, the question of the age of reason or age of discretion arose, suggesting the need to have an understanding and commitment before partaking. So, in common practice, babies and young children in both Catholic and Protestant churches were left without the opportunity for communion on the grounds that they were unable to understand the meaning of the ritual.

Suggested discussion questions:

- 1 Take turns reading the scriptural references listed on page four of the book. What do these words communicate to you?
- 2 Is there anything about early church history that surprises you?
- 3 Reflect upon the examples of children taking communion in the early church.
- 4 What historical practice appeals to you? What does not?
- 5 In what ways do you see history influencing church practices today?
- 6 What do you think of the Age of Reason as a marker for communion? What age do you think the Age of Reason should be?
- 7 Do church rituals (such as marriage, baptism, communion) have meaning because of the understanding and intent behind them or because they invoke God—or both? Is communion a "head" issue?

8 Do you believe children have an understanding of God? If so, give examples.

Remind participants of the assigned reading for the next meeting.

End with prayer.

Week Three

History: Divided Church

Read pp. 33-51

Begin prayer.

Give your own summary of the assigned reading which includes the following:

In this section, Hinant summarizes children's communion and confirmation (confession of faith) practices in the post-Reformation Roman Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran and Reformed traditions, all of which practice infant baptism and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) which does not. The emerging consensus, according to Hinant, among those who practice infant baptism is:

First, first communion should be observed at a younger age than previously practiced.

Second, confirmation (confession of faith in Disciple tradition) requires greater maturity than participation in the Lord's Supper.

Third, greater freedom (and more responsibility) should be given to parents and their children to determine when the child should join his/her parents at the Lord's Table (p. 49).

Hinant then makes the case that, because of their views on confirmation (confession of faith) and baptism, Disciples are well-positioned to move to the policy and practice of communion, then confirmation (confession of faith), and then baptism. In fact, he states that this shift is already taking place in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and his survey data demonstrates this.

Suggested discussion questions:

- 1 In what religious tradition, if any, were you raised? What was the policy regarding communion, baptism, and confirmation?
- 2 What do you recall from your experiences of those rituals?
- 3 What do you think of Hinant's thesis statement about Disciples and the practice of communion/confirmation/baptism? Do you agree or disagree? Why?
- 4 What, if any, challenges still exist with these gateway rituals?

Remind participants of the reading assignment for the next meeting.

End with prayer.

Week Four

Part II: Opening the Table

Read pp. 55-76

Open with prayer.

Give your own summary of the assigned reading which includes the following:

During the winter and spring of 2000/2001, Disciples congregations were surveyed to determine practices concerning children and communion. An impressive 1,737 churches (46%) responded to the survey. These were the four questions:

- 1 Do children in your congregation take communion prior to baptism?
- 2 Does your congregation have a common understanding or informal agreement on children's participation in the Lord's Supper?
- 3 Does your congregation have a formal policy regarding children's participation in the Lord's Supper?
- 4 If unbaptized children commune, at what age do they begin and who makes the decisions - parents, pastor, elders, others?

Many respondents added written comments to their survey responses. These comments reflected both strong emotions and desire for guidance. The Disciples often quote: "Where the Bible speaks, we speak. Where the Bible is silent, we are silent." Yet the Bible offers little concrete guidance on this issue. Establishing formal policy also contradicts the Disciples' principle "No creed but Christ." Following these edicts offers little help to pastors or parents seeking guidance. Perhaps this is why the issue has often been both heated and confusing.

Suggested discussion questions:

- 1 How do you think members of your congregation would answer the survey questions? How would you answer them?
- 2 Identify some potential problems with the "don't ask, don't tell" policy?
- 3 When did you first take communion? What about your children or grandchildren? Who decided when you could commune, and why?
- 4 When did you feel included as a child? Who made you feel that way? Where? How did you feel when you were included in an adult ritual?
- 5 Can you think of a time when you have felt excluded from a ritual? How did that make you feel—about yourself, about those who partook, about the institution? For example, I attended a funeral at a Catholic church earlier this year. It felt strange to watch diverse people of all ages share the feast, yet know I was not welcome. I felt excluded and resentful.

Remind participants the reading assignment for the next meeting.

End with prayer.

Week Five

Openness and Diversity

Read pp. 77-104

Open with prayer.

Give your own summary of the assigned reading which includes the following:

How open should the table be? This section explores the survey responses concerning the justification for different practices and the variety of ways churches find to deal with the differences. Hinant explores the question of how much knowledge, and what kind of knowledge, should be required to participate in communion. In addition, he shares how some congregations, within a denomination that prides itself on diversity, manage to creatively accommodate different views on children's participation in communion.

Suggested discussion questions:

- 1 Is communion a "head" issue or a "heart" issue? Or both?
- 2 Is communion a "belief" issue? If so, should we try to assess belief? Should children be required to make a statement of faith before they are allowed to partake?
- 3 Does communion require a meditative consideration of sins and a desire to atone? Or, is it a community meal of remembrance? Could it be both?
- 4 What does it mean to say that communion is open to all who are "hungry"?
- 5 Do you think an open Table could help in any way to unite a divided world?
- 6 What, if anything, do you think children should be required to know before they participate in communion? If you believe this is important how would you suggest children demonstrate their knowledge? Who should be responsible for teaching the required information to children?
- 7 Do you think children would learn best by participating?
- 8 Should communion look different for children (some people offer goldfish crackers to young children instead of bread)? Why or why not?
- 9 Is there room for diversity in communion practices within the Disciples Denomination or even within a church congregation?

Remind participants of the assigned reading for the next meeting.

End with prayer.

Week Six

Questions of Discernment

Read pp. 105-127

Begin with prayer.

Give your own summary of the assigned reading which includes the following:

Hinant summarizes the different approaches to learning about communion mentioned in the survey: 1) Observation; 2) Participation; 3) Parental Guidance and Conversation; 4) Pastoral Counseling, and Instruction; 5) Organized Classes; and 6) Written Policies or Directives. He also provides a number of sample statements from churches that reflect a variety of viewpoints on children and communion, and varying levels of inclusiveness.

Suggested discussion questions:

- 1 How do you think communion should be "taught" to children?
- 2 What do you think of the sample statements? Which ones resonate most for you? What elements seem most important to emphasize to congregants?
- 3 If you were writing a guiding statement on your church's practice, what would it say? Why?
- 4 Hinant suggests differences of opinion and practice on this matter indicate a need for a process of discernment among Disciples congregations. What do you think?
- 5 What do you think about the movie rating system analogy? How would you rate the policy/practice of your church? Would you like to see this change?

End with prayer.

Week Seven

Concluding/Discerning Session

It is hoped that by this point in the study, participants have clarified their beliefs about unbaptised children and communion. In addition, it is hoped that you feel well-poised to expand the conversation by sharing what you have learned and discussed with the wider church. It would be helpful to document your conclusions. This might take several forms, including a written summary or report, a newsletter article, or the development of a parent's guide to children and communion. You may also wish to make a formal policy recommendation to the governing body of your congregation.

Consider having someone record conclusions, important statements, and questions on newsprint. This will help facilitate discussion during the next and final session.

Suggested discussion questions:

- 1 Should there be a policy or "best practices" about unbaptised children and communion? Who should decide this? If so, who should craft it? The denomination? Individual churches? Clergy? Parents? A special committee?
- 2 Whose table is the Lord's Table? To whom does the church belong?
- 3 What about children? How are their voices heard and their contributions recognized?
- 4 How will you share what you have learned with the congregation?
- 5 How will you encourage others to join the discernment process?
- 6 What else can you do to enact your faith when it comes to children in the church, community, country, and world?

To conclude this session have participants spend some time in silence as they consider their own personal belief about unbaptised children and communion. Have them write down their belief with an explanation of why they believe what they do. Perhaps study participants would like to share their written statements with the whole group or in small groups.

End with prayer.

Week Eight

Planning/Recommendation/Evaluation Session

Consider beginning this final session with a service of communion. You could move to the sanctuary for the service or have it right in your meeting space. This will serve as a reminder that, though policies may need to be established, the thrust of this study has not been about rule making but about discerning whether or not unbaptised children can participate in the celebration of the Lord's Table.

If you did not begin with a service of communion, say an opening prayer.

Review the ideas/conclusions/questions that were shared in session seven.

This session is designed to help with:

1. The development of a plan;
2. The actual writing of a summary statement; and
3. The making of recommendations to the congregation.

Creating a tangible product from the time and thought devoted to this study will help bring about increased awareness, consistency, and possibly change in practice. If you would like help developing a policy that includes children or would like to discuss the issues further, please contact Rev. Kaye Edwards, Office of Family and Children's Ministries, DHM. (434) 832-1119 or kedwards@dhm.disciples.org.

Suggested discussion questions:

- 1 How will you proceed with sharing the results of your gathering? Will you write up a document or statement? How will you accomplish this?
- 2 What changes or additions to current practice will you recommend?
- 3 How will your findings be presented to the congregation?
- 4 What else do you feel inspired to do with what you have learned from this study? Are there actions you could take to make your congregation more welcoming to children?
- 5 Does the congregation have a committee to address children's issues? If not, do you think one should be established?

Concluding Statement:

Individuals and groups need to consider the historical, theological, and biblical aspects of church rituals when deciding how to proceed if changes are in order. Many congregations are finding that including children more fully in worship and other aspects of church life is transforming. However, the issue of children and communion is emotional for many people and we advise carefully approaching the issue with both clergy and laity. You may wish to encourage others to read *Children at the Lord's Table* and discuss the historical facts and issues.

Please be in touch with Kaye Edwards, Director of Family and Children's Ministries, DHM, if you have questions, concerns, want to share your conclusions with others, or would like to be part of an ongoing denominational discussion of welcoming unbaptised children to the Lord's Table.

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1290 Enterprise Drive Lynchburg, Virginia 24502
kedwards@dhm.disciples.org, (434) 832-1119
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Evaluation:

Please have participants evaluate the study. An evaluation form follows. We would appreciate receiving a summary of your evaluations. The summary can be sent to:

Wilma Shuffitt, Administrative Assistant for the Office of Family and Children's Ministries
Disciples Home Missions
P.O. Box 1986
Indianapolis, Indiana 46206
wshuffitt@dhm.disciples.org

Additional Resources:

- Anderson, Herbert, and Jacobson, Susan. (1994) Regarding Children. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Mercer, Joyce Ann. (2005). Welcoming Children. St. Louis: Chalice Press.
- Warner, Sharon. (2005) "The Gate to the Communion Table." *Lexington Theological Quarterly*, Summer edition. Permission to reprint granted. Reprinted by Disciples Home Missions, March 2007.
- Sumney, Jerry L. (2005) "A Communion Table for the Baptized." *Lexington Theological Quarterly*, 40, Fall edition. Permission to reprint granted. Reprinted by Disciples Home Missions, March 2009.

The Gate to the Communion Table

by Sharon Warner

Similar to most churches, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has traditionally held that there is a gate to the communion table. Before one can come to the Table, one has to "pass through the waters" of baptism. But this practice of fencing the Table has in recent years become more and more problematic for many people with regard to unbaptized children. Since Disciples practice "believer's baptism" the question of whether children who are being nurtured in faith in their home, but have not yet been baptized, should participate in the Table meal is theologically troublesome. We need some careful thinking on our practice. Because the Table is such a defining characteristic of Disciple life and worship we need as a church to be very reflective upon our practice of how we extend the invitation on behalf of Jesus to come and partake.

The wide variance among Disciples in the practice of either communing or not communing unbaptized children was recently documented by John Hinant in a provocative research project. In 2000, Hinant sent out a survey to the 3,770 Disciple congregations listed in the Yearbook asking them about their practices concerning the role of children in the Lord's Supper. He received 1,737 surveys in return (47 percent of Disciple congregations). The lead question of the survey was "Do children in your congregation take communion prior to baptism?" A total of 867 (51.1 percent) churches answered "yes" to the question with an additional 218 (12.9 percent) answering both yes and no "indicating that some unbaptized children do and others do not receive communion."¹ As Hinant notes, this combined total of 1,085 churches (64 percent) constitutes approximately two-thirds of the responding Disciple churches who in some form practice the communing of unbaptized children.

Several other questions of the research were quite revealing about Disciple thought and practice. To a question about whether the church has a formal policy regarding children's participation in the Lord's Supper, only 100 (6 percent) churches indicated that they have a formal policy. "And of these 100 churches 56 (58 percent) have a formal policy of non-participation while 41 (42 percent) have a formal policy of participation."² Hinant notes that the large majority of churches seem to function by means of a "don't ask, don't tell policy." If churches don't have a formal policy, who makes the decision, as to whether a child will partake of the Lord's Supper? For 66 percent of the churches responding to the survey, parents make that decision.

The abdication of the church as a whole and of so many individual churches in particular, to think through this issue theologically and make decisions on a practice which embodies the theological meaning of the Table within the life of the faith community, is troublesome. This is a church issue. It is not an issue for individual parents to make on the basis on their personal preferences.³ The church needs to mindfully define its practice based on its study of Scripture, tradition and experience.

With that said I would like to offer some reasons why the church should commune unbaptized children. One is the nature of the Table as the gathering of all who love Jesus and who come to remember him. While baptism is an important landmark in our journey with God, for many people it is not the beginning of that journey. For people who are raised in a 'faith home' their relationship with God, and specifically Jesus, begins in the early spiritual formation of their childhood. In Horace Bushnell's words, being raised in a Christian home allows us "to grow up a Christian and never know [ourselves] as being otherwise."⁴ The Table is a gathering of all who know Jesus and live their lives as followers of him. Many children are Christians, followers of Jesus, before they are baptized.

In reflecting upon the spiritual journey of persons who "grow up Christian and never know themselves as being otherwise" it is important to discern the distinction between belief and

faith. While linked they are not synonymous. Belief is a rational, cognitive assent to that which one holds to be true. Faith is a relationship of trust, reliance upon, commitment to that which is beyond one. It is an activity of "setting one's heart upon" what one experiences as ultimate.⁵ While faith is a major part of young children's lives and relationships, belief comes later in their development. Disciples practice "believer's baptism" and thus do not baptize infants or young children. We believe there is a developmental time where one can responsibly say, "I believe." This does not mean, however, that a child was not a follower of Jesus or a "faither" before that time. To believe requires that one be cognitively able to say, "Given the possibility that this could not be true, I believe that it is true." The ability to do that kind of cognitive reflection is the result of developmental maturation. But prior to the development of that cognitive ability which makes possible the "I believe" confession children have a relationship with God and with Jesus as they hear and tell the stories of Jesus, as they pray and witness to their faith, and as they follow Jesus by their sharing with and loving others. Long before the age of rational understanding children are "faithing."⁶

By making the gate to the Table "believer's baptism" Disciples are in effect positing that rational understanding is required before one can join Jesus for this meal. This theological assertion is very problematic. Who understands this Table? What level of understanding does one have to bring? As we struggle with this issue we must realize that fundamentally, this Table is a mystery. We do not come because we understand it; we come because we trust in the grace of God which passes all understanding. The gate to this Table must never be understanding. Indeed, children are probably the people who can lead us all to this Table for they know about accepting gifts which come from beyond themselves. The gifts of this Table are not to be rationally analyzed, but trustingly received. All people, children, youth and adults, who are followers of Jesus are invited to join him at this Table.

A Communion Table for the Baptized

by Jerry L. Sumney

In the last issue of the Lexington Theological Quarterly [40:2 (2005):127-30], Professor Sharon Warner argued that churches should include unbaptized children among the participants at the Lord's Supper. She argued this point on the basis of theories of faith development and a distinction between belief and faith. I would offer a counter to this view by broadening out theological resources so that Scripture and the church's tradition offer a word. I propose to do this by thinking about the meaning of the Table, and by thought about the Table and baptism.

Though we will not all agree about the details of what participation at the Table means, it must be more than receptive thoughts about Jesus. Coming to the Table must entail more than thinking that Jesus had some good ideas and that we might think about following some of them. In fact, the elements themselves signal that more than considering following Jesus is involved in participation. Coming to this Table involves a commitment of one's life to God, a commitment to live a life patterned on the life patterned on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The focus of the elements is squarely on the death of Jesus and that is how the early church understood it. It is the reminder of the body and blood of Christ *given for us* (however we might understand that). There is a lever of cognition and mental development and commitment necessary to take part in such a reminder appropriately.

The signal of coming to faith in a way that appropriates this gift for ourselves is baptism. Baptism is the formalization of our commitment to live for God and see God present in Jesus. It is at that point that we commit our lives to recognition of Christ as Lord and Savior. In the New Testament and throughout church history, baptism has been the initiation into the church. Professor Warner is certainly correct that children raised in the church often do not have "conversion experiences," but at some point they must make the faith their own. From the earliest times, baptism is the moment at which people have become members of the church, the time when they dedicate their lives to God, the ritual by which they become heirs of God's kingdom, children of God of a special sort. It is as citizens of this community and as heirs within this community that Christians come to the Table.

It is important that this Table be reserved for the baptized because the church has seen this as a moment during which the presence of God is particularly powerful in the context of the gathered community. As Paul talks about it in 1 Corinthians 11, proper participation brings with it blessings from God and improper participation explains why some in the church have had problems. While we do not want to posit the improper eating at the Table will bring illness, the point of the passage is that God is present here in a way that requires a proper recognition of who God is, who Christ is, and what God expects of God's people. This kind of a meeting of God and turning to God for sustenance requires a level of both cognition and commitment.

In both the New Testament and the church's tradition, baptism is the moment of each person's entrance into full membership in the church. In the New Testament, baptism is the moment when the Spirit comes to live in a person, the moment one "puts on Christ," the event at which the person claims the life of faith and is claimed by God through the enactment of the death of resurrection of Christ. It is at that moment that the baptized receives a new identity that is to determine the orientation of all of life. If baptism does not signify such things, there is little reason to maintain believer's baptism (perhaps any kind). These rich understandings of baptism identify that act as significant for both the person and the community. Baptism should be much more than graduation from the middle school Lenten series class. Part of the reason many Disciples oppose the practice of baptizing those who come to the denomination from another tradition is that God acts at baptism in a way that is not repeatable. Such an understanding of

baptism elevates its meaning in ways that recognize it as an entrance into the church through an act of God, an act that brings God's blessing and gives access to the gifts of God.

It seems to me that inviting the unbaptized to the Table belittles both the Table and baptism. Beyond that, it belittles the acts of God those things represent. This is not, of course, the intention to those who invite children. But I think these are the theological and communal results.

Communion

There certainly needs to be ways that children are welcomed into the life of the church before baptism. Various congregations have ways of doing this (children's choirs, etc.). Having children wait until they are baptized to partake of the Table is not barring the way to God, but designating moments that encourage them to think (at the appropriate level for their age) about the confessions and commitments of those who do partake. They can ask, "What is special about this meal?" Such questions require us to be ready to interpret our faith and lead the next generation to meaningful participation and substantive commitment to life in the church to these who are devoted to serving God through Christ.

End Notes

¹ John Hinant, "Children at the Lord's Table," 2005, unpublished paper, 54. In this paper Hinant shares not only the full results of the survey but also comprehensive research into the practice of communing children through the tradition. He explores the practice in the time of the apostles through the fifteenth century as well as in Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed and Disciple traditions. His research shows that children's participation in communion was the general practice of the Western Church for at least two thirds of its history until the efforts of Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) took it away. It has always been the practice of the Eastern Church.

² Hinant, 56.

³ This assertion is a plea for a church policy. We all recognize that given a common practice of the church an individual parent may or may not follow that common practice. But at least, when a parent makes a decision vis à vis the church's position on the issue that parent decides to follow the church's position or counter it. The parent is not making a decision in a vacuum or in an

ambiguous situation of "it is up to you." By virtue of a church's explicit policy, the church confronts parents with the claim that "it is not up to you"; this is a wider issue.

⁴ Horace Bushnell, *Christian Nurture* (Charles Scribner, 1861; reprint Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 10.

⁵ See the work of James Fowler, especially *Stages of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), Chapters 2 and 3.

⁶ In the faith development research and literature faith is understood as a verb, as an activity of "setting one's heart upon." See the work of James Fowler.