

PREPARED TO PARTAKE

Discipling Our Children Toward the Table

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Cornerstone Essentials

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Introduction: What Is the Ultimate Aim of Parenting?

Few things reveal our prevailing heart commitments like parenting. That's true not only of our actions and reactions toward our children, but also of our aims and intentions in raising them.

If, in a manner similar to King Solomon (1 Kgs. 3:5), the Lord gave you the opportunity to ask one thing—not for yourself, but for your child—and it would be granted on the spot, what would you request? Observing many parents today, it would seem that not a few would ask God to make their child an academic prodigy, a professional athlete, a financial success, or a famous celebrity. The less grandiose among us might simply ask for a long life free from sickness and pain, or a happy marriage with 2.5 kids in a middle-class suburb.

What is the one thing you are after in your parenting that trumps every other thing? Your honest answer to that question reveals a lot about your heart. In fact, it reveals the object of your worship.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism Q&A 1 famously expounds the ultimate aim of humanity: “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” The Triune God has created us for Himself, and the primary goal of our existence is to render happy worship and service to Him with our hearts, lips, and lives.

To state the obvious: if the ultimate aim of human life is the soul-satisfying exaltation of God, then it ought to be our ultimate aim in the parenting of our children. We could rework the catechism this way:

Q: What is the chief end of parenting?

A: The chief end of parenting is to mold the next generation to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever.

We want our kids to excel in academics or athletics, not as an end in itself, but as a means to the end of knowing God and making Him known. We desire their physical, relational, and financial health so that they might serve God and bless others for the long haul. Our child's happy enjoyment of the Lord must be the prevailing thing we are after, to which every other thing is subordinate.

If that is true of your heart, then you will earnestly desire your son or daughter to make public profession of faith. You won't be content with your child merely tolerating your faith while they are in the home; you will want her to own the faith for herself. You won't be satisfied with your child merely knowing a lot about Christ; you will long for him to know Christ in truth. You won't rest in your child going through the motions of worship; you will seek to grip her heart with the infinite worth of God so that she becomes a genuine worshiper of the Triune God. You won't sit at ease in response to the promises of God held out in your child's baptism; you will tirelessly call him or her to sincere faith in the crucified and risen Christ pictured in the baptismal waters.

Fulfilling Your Watery Commitments

Taking time to annually review your wedding vows can be a profoundly helpful reminder of your covenant commitment to your spouse. We are so quick to forget the promises we make, even the most important ones. When your child was brought to the baptismal font, you made vows before God and His people, which included affirming these two questions (found in DPW III, B.1.5):

- Do you promise to teach diligently to [name of child] the principles of our holy Christian faith, revealed in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and summarized in the Confession of Faith and Catechisms of this Church?
- Do you promise to endeavor, by all the means that God has appointed, to bring [name of child] up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, encouraging (him/her) to appropriate for (himself/herself) the blessings and fulfill the obligations of the covenant?

When was the last time you pondered these commitments? I encourage you to stop reading right now and take a few minutes to prayerfully consider how you are doing in carrying out each one.

These two vows must be held together because our diligent instruction in Christian truth is to the end that our children might lay hold of Jesus Christ for salvation (the blessings of the covenant) and serve Him in righteousness and holiness (the obligations of the covenant). To appropriate the blessings of the new covenant, one must publicly confess the saving sufficiency

and sovereign supremacy of the covenant Mediator. Jesus said, “So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 10:32). It is those who own Christ before others whom Christ owns before His Father. The apostle concurs: “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved” (Rom. 10:9–10). That believing confession flowing from a believing heart is the beginning of a lifetime of service to Jesus, faithfully carrying out the obligations of the covenant. The watery commitments you made at the baptismal fount call you to endeavor after this in your children with diligence.

Think of the father whose ultimate aim in parenting is to make his daughter an academic prodigy—graduating as valedictorian, getting a full-ride to an Ivy League institution, and eventually earning a PhD. He is going to be diligent to train her in this direction: spending big money on private tutors, requiring her to read ferociously, and doing everything in his power to inspire a love of learning and academic excellence. Do we evidence a similar diligence in leading our children to Christ?

Fulfilling the Great Commandment

Often, the diligence parents show in molding their child evidences that they love themselves more than they love their child. This is the dad living vicariously through his son in the pursuit of his unrealized dream of playing college basketball. This is the mom plastering her social media with pictures of her beautiful, popular, and brilliant daughter as a way of saying to the watching world, “Check out what an awesome job I am doing in the parenting department!”

It is so easy for parenting to be driven by self-love—even in our training of our children in the Christian faith. Why do we want them to believe the gospel? What is motivating our desire for them to make a public profession? Is it so that we will be esteemed in the church and our families might be set forth as models to strive after? Or is it because we earnestly love our children and desire their spiritual and eternal good?

The greatest commandment is summarized in a single word—*love* (Matt. 22:34–40; Rom. 13:8–10). Christian parenting must be Spirit-filled parenting, because without the sanctifying

presence and power of the Holy Spirit, our hearts will remain in the grip of self-love, not the selfless, others-oriented love we are called to. Only through the Spirit can true love blossom toward our children (Gal. 5:22).

What is love? It is not a flippant emotion, but a treasuring affection. It is an intense inclination of the heart toward an object deemed so valuable that it is willing to sacrifice itself for the good of that object. If you treasure your son or daughter, you will want the absolute best for them and be willing to sacrifice yourself for them to obtain it. The Christian understands that there is nothing better than being reconciled to God through Christ forever. As we make our child's eternal blessedness in God the ultimate aim of our parenting, we love them well and thereby fulfill the law.

Fulfilling the Great Commission

But in so doing, we also fulfill the mission God has given His redeemed people. God's original commission to Adam entailed filling the earth with image-bearing worshipers who submit to and spread the reign of God throughout the earth (Gen. 1:28). It was a mission Adam failed to carry out through his covenant-breaking rebellion, but one that the second Adam, Jesus Christ, is fulfilling by way of His perfect life, sacrificial death, and victorious resurrection. As the covenant head of a new humanity, He commissions His people: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19–20). Strictly speaking, the only imperative in the Greek text is the command to *make disciples*. Going, baptizing, and teaching are all in service of this singular goal.

Disciples multiply disciples, and one of the primary contexts in which that happens is the domestic sphere, as Christian parents give themselves to molding their children into sincere followers of Jesus—who see, savor, serve, and share Him. They teach their baptized children the things of Christ as they go about all of life: "And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise" (Deut. 6:6–7).

Disciples are those who publicly identify with their Master. It is clear to anyone paying attention that they are with Him. If our chief end in parenting is that our children would become sincere disciples of Jesus Christ who glorify and enjoy Him, then we will aim for their public profession of faith and admission to the public and proclamatory sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

The purpose of this little work is to encourage and assist you in that great endeavor. Part one lays the biblical and theological groundwork, answering many common questions surrounding profession of faith in the process. Part two provides help in teaching your children the central truths of the Christian faith which are the lifeblood of a credible profession of faith. The goal is not only to equip you to prepare your child to make profession, but also to help you discern if he or she is ready to speak to the elders about taking this step. The conclusion sets forth the next steps once you believe your child is.

May the Lord grant you great wisdom and joy as you disciple your son or daughter toward the Table!

PART ONE
Covenantal Foundations

1. Covenant Privilege

The glorification and enjoyment of God, which is the chief end of humanity, presupposes that humans are fundamentally related to God. This is a premise writ large across the entire Bible, which calls this divine-human relationship a *covenant*.

The closest created parallel we have to the covenant between God and humanity is the marriage covenant between a man and a woman. Rather than a cold contract that can be annulled flippantly, marriage is a lifelong covenant wherein both parties pledge their single-eyed devotion, giving themselves in body and soul to the other exclusively. So too, God's covenant with His people is no heartless contractual agreement, but an exclusive, enduring communion bond wherein God devotes Himself to His people, and His people devote themselves to God. The heart of the covenant is this: "I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God" (Exod. 6:7). Possessed by God and possessing God—this is the essence of blessedness.

Human marriage is a covenant between two ontological equals, but that is where God's covenant with humans differs drastically. He is the Creator and covenant Lord, and we are the creatures and covenant servants. This is no relationship between equals; it is the most unequal match imaginable—the infinite God wedding Himself to His finite image. What privilege!

Since the faith our children come to profess is inherently covenantal, and the Table they are being disciplined toward is inherently covenantal, it is vitally important for us to grasp the nature of God's covenant which we define as *the affectionate and exclusive communion bond enjoyed between God and His people*. It is what we and our children were made for.

Created for Covenant

No sooner did God create the first man than we find Him relating to Adam by way of covenant (Gen. 2:15–17). The Westminster Shorter Catechism states, "When God had created man, he entered into a covenant of life with him, upon condition of perfect obedience; forbidding him to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, upon pain of death" (A. 12). The Westminster Confession of Faith calls this relationship "a covenant of works" (7.2). Both names are fitting because, in this divine arrangement, Adam was promised a higher state of immutable life with

God (signified in the tree of life) upon the condition of his personal and perfect obedience to God's word (signified in the tree of the knowledge of good and evil).

Adam did not stand alone on the human side of this relationship, for he was the covenant representative of the entire human race that would come from him (Rom. 5:12–21). Had he trampled upon the serpent's head and exercised believing obedience to God's word, he would have obtained the blessedness of the covenant not merely for himself, but for all of us. That blessedness is nothing less than perfect communion with God in a serpent-less, temptation-less, globe-encompassing garden, with a glorified soul no longer able to sin. We're given a preview of this glorious reality in Revelation 21 and 22.

But instead of crushing the serpent's head beneath his heel, Adam listened to the deceiver (Gen. 3:1–6). He broke covenant with God, and for the first time in history, humanity had the inclination to hide from God in guilt and shame (Gen. 3:8). The man created to draw near to God in the most intimate way imaginable now found himself unfit to approach God due to sin. What tragedy! The divine-human relationship he was created for was severed. Just as the marriage covenant can be broken when one party is unfaithful and commits adultery, so too can God's covenant with man. Adam, by siding with the serpent, committed spiritual adultery—betraying the one he was called to glorify and losing the one he was called to enjoy.

None of us escapes the effects of his rebellion: "one trespass led to condemnation for all men.... For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners" (Rom. 5:18–19). The covenant curse of death—physical, spiritual, and eternal—spread to all humans through Adam (1 Cor. 15:21). What is death in the ultimate sense but separation from the God of life? We are born in this woeful condition in Adam (Ps. 51:5), and we can do nothing to deliver ourselves from the sin that brought it to pass.

If ever the privilege of glorifying and enjoying God in a loving communion bond would become a reality for fallen sons and daughters of Adam—like us and our children—it would require a second Adam to suffer our curse and merit our blessedness. Praise be to God for providing such an Adam to fulfill the covenant of works and to establish the covenant of grace!

Redeemed for Covenant

The covenant privilege forfeited through our sin in Adam would be graciously regained through Jesus Christ. And God didn't waste any time in telling the first man about it! Bringing the guilty and ashamed Adam out from hiding, God declared the first gospel promise in the form of a curse upon the serpent: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Gen. 3:15). Why is enmity good news? Because, though humanity had sided with the serpent, God would graciously set some of fallen humanity against the serpent and would ultimately raise up a son of Adam who would do what Adam should have done—crushing the serpent's head beneath His righteous heel. As a picture of His gospel provision, God clothed Adam and Eve in the skins of the first animal sacrifices before exiling them into the wilderness, away from His life-giving presence (Gen. 3:21–22). God would see to it that His purpose to live in an affectionate and exclusive communion bond with His people would be realized—and so the covenant of grace began.

From Seth to Noah to Abram, God was faithful to save a people from spiritual and eternal death who trusted in His covenant promise. Eventually, that people became the nation of Israel. Out of all the peoples of the earth, God showed grace to them (Exod. 19:4–6)—always intending for that grace to spill over to all the nations (Gen. 12:3).

But instead, Israel grew proud in their privileged position. While the covenant of grace which they enjoyed did not require perfect obedience on their part, it did require faith in God's saving promise, and true faith always leads to imperfect yet sincere obedience. Taking their covenant privilege for granted, they failed to trust and obey their covenant Lord. Listen to God's indictment of them: "But like Adam they transgressed the covenant" (Hos. 6:7). Like the first Adam, Israel committed spiritual adultery. This was not one isolated instance; it was their chronic condition in both the wilderness and the promised land. They broke the old administration of the covenant of grace through unbelief and came under the curse of exile and death like Adam.

The entire Old Testament leaves us eagerly awaiting the promised One who would not fail like Adam and Israel. He is the second Adam and the true Israel. He is the coming One foretold in the garden who would deal a definite death-blow to the serpent—being bruised in the process. How? By perfectly obeying the law's precepts in His life and perfectly satisfying the

law's penalties in His death as the righteous representative of His unrighteous people. The life held out to the first Adam in the covenant of works would be obtained by Him. So at just the right time, the eternal Son of God took on human flesh to fulfill God's saving promise, purchasing our salvation so that we might be reconciled to God!

Through His finished work, a new and final administration of the covenant of grace has been established, wherein God promises: "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more" (Jer. 31:33–34). What grace! And it is grace offered to us and our children in the gospel. We need the guilt of our sin forgiven and our hearts renovated to love God so that we can dwell with Him in a reciprocal communion bond of intimate knowing and loving. That is what is freely given to sinners in the gospel. Truly, nothing compares!

This restored communion with God is pictured in a covenant feast—the Lord's Supper—which engages our five senses with a visible, edible, and tangible sign that through Christ's broken body and poured-out blood, peace has been made between sinners and God. Through Christ, we no longer shrink back in horror before God, but we draw near in delight, as through His blood, righteousness, and Spirit, we are made fit to glorify and enjoy God. We'll think more about the nature of the sacramental meal in the next chapter, but let us simply marvel here at the fact that God has shown such grace to sinners!

When our children own the Mediator Jesus Christ as their Savior and King, they are reconciled to God in a covenant bond that is leading toward an eschatological feast—of which the Supper is but an appetizer (Rev. 19:6–10). That feast will give way to an eternal marriage between Christ and His people.

It is this unspeakable privilege that we are called to lead our children into, as they publicly say 'Yes' to Christ's marriage proposal in the gospel, living in sincere and pure devotion to Him through word and sacrament until the day when faith becomes sight.

2. Covenant Pictures

When hiking or driving in unfamiliar territory, signs are important. They direct us where we need to go and assure us that we are not lost, even when it might seem otherwise. Despite all the technological sophistication of our day and the spoken directions given by our smartphones, we still look for visible signs to confirm that we are indeed heading the right way.

When God covenants with humanity, He does so through audible speech, but He always accompanies His covenant word with visible, tangible, and often even edible signs. This was true of the two trees in Eden that accompanied God's covenant word to Adam (Gen. 2:9), the rainbow that accompanied God's covenant word to Noah (Gen. 9:13), and the circumcision that accompanied God's covenant word to Abraham (Gen. 17:10). God could have left us with the propositions of the covenant alone. His word, after all, is sufficient. But, taking into account our creaturely weakness, He gives us pictures of the covenant so that we might grapple with its blessings and obligations via all five senses—hearing, seeing, touching, tasting, and smelling. He provides His people with visible signage to accompany His audible directions to further ensure they don't get lost as they journey to glory. Under the new covenant, He gives two such covenant pictures—baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Sadly, the pictures that are intended to clarify our spiritual vision have often been the source of great confusion and division. It may come as a surprise that the subject given the most space in the Westminster Confession of Faith is the sacraments—not the Trinity or the person and work of Christ. Three chapters consisting of 20 paragraphs are devoted to unpacking the nature of these covenant pictures. Why? The reason is historical. In the ecclesiastical context of the Westminster Assembly, the sacraments were sources of grave misunderstanding. The divines knew that if the church misread their God-given signage, it would lead to a troubled earthly pilgrimage and might even keep them from reaching their heavenly home.

As we disciple our sons and daughters toward the Table, it is important to have a clear understanding of what the sacraments are and what role they play for God's people. Many questions surrounding profession of faith are answered when God's covenant pictures are rightly perceived.

The Relation Between Baptism and the Lord's Supper

Under the old covenant, God gave multiple covenant signs with distinct purposes. Circumcision initiated covenant relation to God, picturing union with Him (Gen. 17:11). For sinners to be united to God requires gracious separation from both the guilt and power of sin, which is why circumcision signified the righteousness received by faith in justification (Rom. 4:11) and the heart renovation received by the Spirit in regeneration and sanctification (Rom. 2:28–29). To summarize, circumcision was a picture of union with God through a separation from sin by Spirit-worked faith. It necessarily preceded the Passover, which confirmed or ratified Israel's covenant relation to God, picturing communion with Him (Exod. 12:43–49). Through this annual feast, Israel remembered the substitute that died in their place to deliver them from bondage in Egypt unto the blessedness of fellowship with God, symbolized in eating and drinking in His presence.

Circumcision as a sign of covenant union preceded and prepared the way for the Passover as a sign of covenant communion. Why? Because you can't confirm a relationship that hasn't been initiated. You can't enjoy communion if there is not first union. That's like a couple going on the honeymoon before the wedding ceremony with rings and vows. But to be content with covenant union while forgoing the joy of covenant communion is like going through the wedding only to skip the honeymoon! God's people needed both images to set before them the full-orbed panorama of God's covenantal grace.

These bloody old covenant signs graphically pictured the curse sin deserves and God's gospel deliverance from it so that His people might know blessing through union and communion with Him. Ultimately, they prepared the way for the coming of Christ, who "was cut off out of the land of the living" (Isa. 53:8). At the cross, Jesus came under God's bloody curse, which is why Paul refers to it as "the circumcision of Christ" (Col. 2:11). This He did as "our Passover lamb" (1 Cor. 5:7). John quotes Exodus 12:46, setting forth the crucified Christ as the ultimate Lamb whose bones remained unbroken as He spilled His blood for us (Jn. 19:36). By faith in that blood, we who were once alienated from God are reconciled to Him, knowing the blessed privilege of covenant union and communion with Him. Having fulfilled both old covenant

sacraments in His bloody death, Jesus instituted two bloodless sacraments for His new covenant people—baptism and the Lord’s Supper (Matt. 26:26–29; 28:19).

Water baptism is a picture of the same reality as circumcision—union with God through a separation from sin’s guilt in justification (Col. 2:11–14) and sin’s power in sanctification (Rom. 6:1–4). It is the sign of initiation into the covenant. The Lord’s Supper signifies the same reality as the Passover—our intimate communion with God through identification with the sin-bearing Lamb substituted in our place. “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?” (1 Cor. 10:16). In this new covenant feast, the restored relationship between God and His people through the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ is confirmed or ratified.

As parents, understanding the relation between the two signs is important for a number of reasons. First, it shows us that a non-negotiable requirement for coming to the Table is water baptism. The sign of covenant union always precedes and prepares for the sign of covenant communion. Has your child been baptized?

Second, it helps us to grasp the distinct nature of each sign. As signs of union with God, the human party in both old covenant circumcision and new covenant baptism is passive. No one baptizes or circumcises themselves! It is something done to them, just as our initial union with Christ in regeneration is something done to us by another. “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved” (Eph. 2:4–5). But our passivity in being united to God through Christ gives way to activity as the life of the Spirit begins to pulsate in our souls. That is why both signs of covenant communion—the old covenant Passover and the new covenant Supper—require believing engagement on the part of the human participants. Bread is not shoved down our throats; we take and eat. Wine is not injected through an IV; we take and drink. In the process, we examine ourselves, remember Christ, discern His body, and proclaim His death (1 Cor. 11:23–29). In other words, we are thoroughly active because communion with God is no passive enjoyment. It engages us in the whole of our redeemed humanity. This is one reason why we give the sacrament of baptism to our passive infants (and why Abraham did the same with circumcision), but withhold the sacrament of the

Lord's Supper from our infants and children until they evidence the faith and understanding requisite to actively engage with God at the Table.

The Relation Between the Sign and the Thing Signified

One of the common errors God's people have fallen into throughout redemptive history is to rest in the outward sign of union—whether circumcision or baptism—as sufficient in and of itself. Certain church traditions erroneously teach *baptismal regeneration*, the idea that the waters actually effect our mystical and spiritual union with God and the cleansing from sin that requires. But that is to fundamentally misunderstand the nature of a sign.

Imagine you are getting sleepy on a long road trip when you suddenly encounter a sign on the side of the highway with a dark-green, two-tailed mermaid sporting a crown on her head. It's been put there to direct you to a place at the next exit where you can get a mediocre cup of coffee. But if you pull over in front of the sign, stare into the eyes of the mermaid, and say, "Hi, I'd like to order a Venti Caramel Macchiato," how will that turn out for you? Not so good. The wordless sign is not the Starbucks; it points to the Starbucks. So too, the sacraments are wordless signs pointing us to spiritual realities beyond themselves. More than that, they confirm or seal those realities—just as the sign on the highway confirms to your sleepy body that there is caffeine for sale ahead.

There is nothing magical about the waters of baptism. They have no power to deliver our children from sin and unite them to God. Only Jesus can do that! But the sacramental water signifies the crucified and risen Christ, who is able and willing to deliver us from sin's penalty and power and unite us to God forever. So we don't presume our kids are saved because they are baptized. We don't assure them of their justification because they are baptized. Instead, we point them back to their baptism and say, "Look at the grace of God demonstrated to you! He has brought you into the covenant community, put His name upon you, and given you everything you need to know, glorify, and enjoy Him eternally through Christ. Don't forfeit that. Lay hold of the Christ offered to you in your baptism and never let Him go." When our kids sin, we point them to their baptism and say, "This is a picture of Jesus's ability and desire to cleanse and transform you." We don't rest in the sign, but lead our kids to the Christ whom the sign

points to. For they need the internal working of the Spirit signified and sealed in the waters so that they might be delivered from their old life of sin to live fully for God. That initial work of grace, symbolized in both circumcision and baptism, is what gives rise to a true and lively faith and makes one fit to come to the sacramental feast to enjoy communion with God.

In addition to being signs of covenant salvation, sacraments are also seals (Rom. 4:11). What is meant by this? As covenant seals, sacraments testify to the genuineness and sufficiency of the benefits of Christ's redeeming work. These signs attest to God's intent to fulfill all His covenant promises to those who participate in the sacraments in true (even if weak) faith.

The Relation Between the Sacraments and Preaching

One indication that our children are ready to come to the Table is when they consistently evidence a believing understanding of and love for the preached word. In certain traditions, the sacraments all but swallow up the word. But the Bible makes clear that these visible signs are always servants of God's audible words. Whether the rainbow under Noah, the cutting off of the foreskin under Abraham, the slaughtering of the lamb under Moses, or the washing with water under Christ—these signs confirm God's gospel promises and are empty apart from those promises. Our Directory for Public Worship states, "When the sacraments are being celebrated, the minister shall always accompany them by the preaching of the Word, and he shall take especial care in that preaching to proclaim Christ and his benefits, so that God's people can understand what the sacrament means" (III.A.1). Before one can understand the visible word, they must first understand the audible word.

If your child is not actively engaging with or understanding the preached word, then it is a sure sign they will not actively engage with or understand the sacramental word. If they treat the sermon lightly, they will treat the Supper lightly. Here are a few questions to ask as you seek to discern your child's readiness to speak to the elders about coming to the Table:

- Does he or she listen to preaching attentively?
- Does he or she receive preaching as God's word to him or her?
- Does he or she answer questions and make comments about the preaching that evidence a true understanding of the meaning and application of the biblical text?

- Does he or she ask questions about the preaching that evidence a desire to understand better?
- Does he or she ever express a conviction of sin or a need to change in response to the preaching?

The age of your child must be factored in when answering these questions. For example, a seven-year-old might evidence attentive listening by drawing a picture of what he is hearing, while a teenager might show the same engagement through detailed note-taking. Each is engaging God's audible word with a believing heart—but in a manner suitable to his age. Where such engagement is consistent, it is a sign of being ready to engage with God's visible word at the Table, unto the strengthening of faith and the deepening of communion with God. Every sermon is an opportunity to disciple our children toward this very thing.

3. Covenant Participants

One of the pressing questions that arises whenever the sacraments are discussed is this: Who are the proper recipients of these covenant pictures? Since they are signs of God's covenantal grace, the obvious answer is that the proper recipients are covenant members—that is, those whom God has called out of the world to be His special and beloved people.

Concerning the visible covenant community, the Westminster Confession of Faith states that it “consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children” (25.2). In the broader context, “the true religion” is understood as the Christian religion, which teaches that the Triune Creator saves sinners by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, unto His glory alone.

It goes without saying that those who profess saving attachment to Christ, the mediator of the covenant, are members of the covenant. But where we often get tripped up—especially as hyper-individualistic Westerners—is with the phrase “and of their children.” Where does that come from? And if it is true, what implications does it have for our children, particularly regarding their admission to the Lord's Supper? These are important questions that require carefully nuanced answers as we grapple with the biblical teaching.

Covenant Households

Our God is a family God. From the inception of the covenant of grace, He reveals Himself as one who covenants with households.

- God's covenant promise to Adam involved his children: “I will put enmity between... your offspring and her offspring” (Gen. 3:15).
- God's covenant promise to Noah involved his children: “Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you” (Gen. 9:9).
- God's covenant promise to Abraham involved his children: “And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you” (Gen. 17:7).

- God's covenant promise through Moses involved the Israelites' children: "I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live" (Deut. 30:19).
- God's covenant promise to David involved his children: "I have made a covenant with my chosen one; I have sworn to David my servant: I will establish your offspring forever" (Ps. 89:3–4).

Every administration of the covenant of grace in the Old Testament is made with professing believers *and their children* without exception.

Our Baptist brothers and sisters do not disagree with us here. But they argue that a monumental shift has occurred in how God relates to His people in the new covenant. They claim the household principle—woven seamlessly throughout all redemptive history prior to Christ's coming—ceases to be operative with the inauguration of the new covenant in Christ's blood. Now, we are told, God covenants only with individual believers, relegating the children of believers outside the covenant community until they publicly profess faith. Thus, although the sign of initiation into the old covenant (circumcision) was administered to infants of professing believers (Gen. 17:12), they contend that the sign of initiation into the new covenant (baptism) ought to be administered only to professing believers. But is this how the Bible would have us understand the new covenant?

Before jumping to the New Testament, we must examine the Old Testament prophecies God gave concerning this final administration of the covenant of grace. When God appeared to Abram, He promised to make the nation that would come from his loins the instrument of spreading His saving blessing to "all the families of the earth" (Gen. 12:3). After prophesying the apostasy and exile of that nation, Moses foretold a future restoration and renewal of the covenant: "And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live" (Deut. 30:6). As Israel suffered exile, God comforted His people with yet another promise of a new covenant: "I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever, for their own good and the good of their children after them" (Jer. 32:39). These Old Testament promises do not envision a radical shift from God relating to believers *and their children* to God relating to

believers *alone*. On the contrary, they assume and assert that God will continue to relate to households.

So it should not surprise us when we hear Peter, on the day of Pentecost, say to a massive crowd of penitent Jews: “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you *and for your children* and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself” (Acts 2:38–39; emphasis mine). In this final administration of the covenant of grace, the scope of God’s covenant does not narrow—it broadens. It does not exclude the children of believing Jews; it now expands to encompass “all who are far off,” a reference to Isaiah 57:19 and the Gentiles. God is still covenanting with households—but now He is doing so from among all the nations.

When Peter, a Jewish man, preached to Jewish hearers, saying, “the promise is for you and for your children,” they would have understood that God’s covenant always has—and continues to—include households. Had this not been the case, there would have certainly been a massive uproar from these ethnic Jews. For never in the history of humanity had God related to the children of His people like that! Their silence speaks volumes.

So does the practice of the apostles as they administer the sign of initiation into the new covenant—baptism—to households, just as circumcision was. Lydia repents and believes in Christ, and “she was baptized, and her household as well” (Acts 16:15). A Philippian jailer comes to faith in Christ, and “he was baptized at once, he and all his family” (Acts 16:33). We also see household baptisms with Cornelius (Acts 10) and Crispus (Acts 18), and Paul refers to baptizing “the household of Stephanas” (1 Cor. 1:16). God has always and continues to covenant with households. The sign of initiation into that covenant is administered accordingly, symbolizing gracious separation from sin and union with God.

This is why, in the apostolic letters to the church, children are explicitly addressed. In the first-century Roman world, this would have been striking. Household codes of that day typically ignored children. But Paul addressed children directly (Eph. 6:1–3), because he understood them to be among “the saints” to whom he was writing (1:1). As a side note, Paul assumed children would be present in the public assembly to hear his inspired letter as it was read and maybe

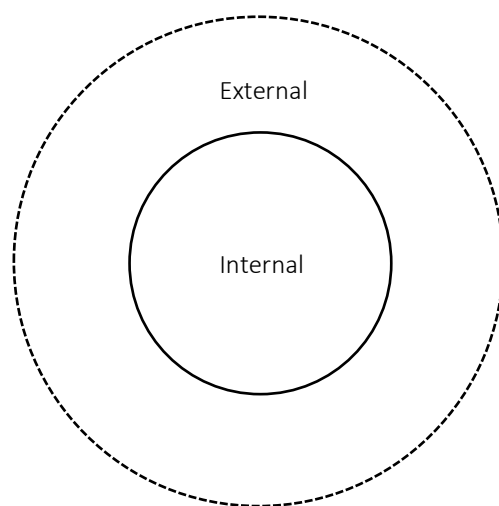
even expounded. The idea of dismissing children before the sermon would have been unthinkable to him. They are part of the church, and therefore rightful recipients of both preaching and baptism.

If the children of believers are rightly considered members of the covenant, wouldn't that make them proper recipients of the sacramental bread and wine? Some answer affirmatively, espousing what is called *paedocommunion*. This view holds that children of believers do not need to profess faith to come to the Table. In extreme forms, this includes the belief that an unborn child partakes of the sacrament in utero as the mother partakes, and that newborn infants should have the bread dipped in wine placed in their mouths as the assembly partakes (with prayers they don't choke!). Its more moderate proponents argue that once a child can eat solids, believing parents should bring them to the Table.

Paedocommunion may seem like a logical conclusion—covenant members should receive covenant signs. But the position lacks biblical nuance and theological care.

Covenant Dimensions

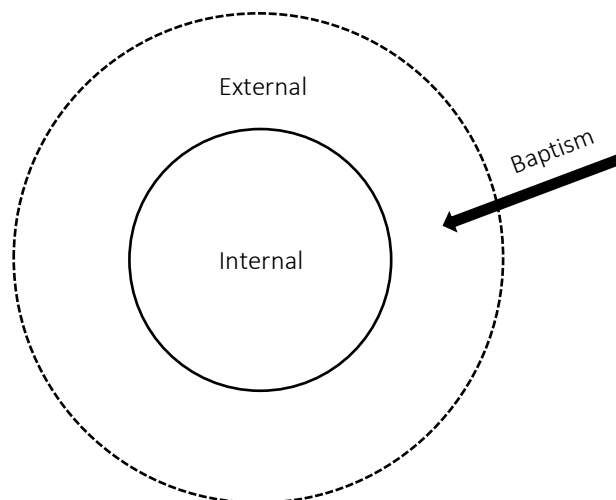
Advocates of both credobaptism and paedocommunion tend to view the covenant as a simple circle—you're either in or out. But Scripture presents a far more nuanced picture. There is both an *external* and an *internal* dimension to the covenant. Rather than a single circle, we might better represent it like this:



Take the old covenant. Circumcision made an eight-day-old boy externally and visibly a member of the covenant community. A formal covenant relationship was initiated between the child and God, marking him as set apart from the world. But did this guarantee that he was regenerate, justified, and reconciled to God? Certainly not. The sign was no assurance of the spiritual blessings it signified. If Israel's history proved anything, it was that many had the externals of the covenant without possessing the internals.

The possibility of such remains true in the new covenant. Through baptism, we are brought into the visible covenant community—but the sign itself does not guarantee union with Christ. Both credobaptists and paedobaptists agree: not everyone who is baptized is or will become a genuine believer. Many tragically never come to know the reality their baptism signifies. Some of these individuals eventually leave the church or are excommunicated (1 John 2:19; 1 Cor. 5:2). Hence, the outermost circle of the covenant is dotted—it is possible to be visibly in the covenant and later depart or be removed. But many individuals remain in the covenant community until death who never receive and rest upon the crucified and risen Christ pictured in their baptism. They are hypocritical disciples, never having sincerely tasted and seen that He is good and risen up to follow Him.

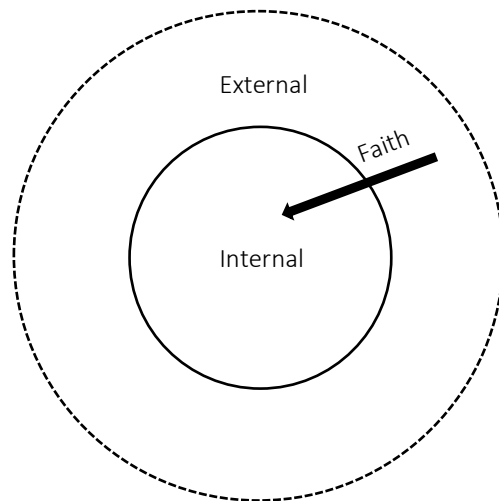
The external rite of baptism brings our children into the visible covenant community. Here is what it looks like:



As Christian parents, we cannot rest content with our children merely having the externals of the covenant, however. By our example and instruction, we call them daily to lay hold of Jesus Christ,

the mediator of the covenant offered to them in baptism. For apart from a Spirit-wrought faith in Him, they cannot be truly united to God.

Through family worship and public worship, we urge them to move from the outer to the inner circle of the covenant—by receiving all the spiritual blessings offered in the gospel. In this way, they come to embrace the blessings and obligations of the covenant through faith in Christ.



The inner circle is solid because it represents the unbreakable bond of saving union with Christ. One who is regenerate cannot return to spiritual death; one who is justified cannot later be condemned.

Think of a wedding ceremony: it is possible to say vows and exchange rings while harboring an adulterous heart. The internal ought to match the external—but even if it doesn't, the marriage is still valid. Likewise, in baptism, we are marked externally as belonging to God. But the external waters cannot change our hearts. We need the Spirit's internal work to be delivered from sin and live for God. This initial work of grace—signified in both circumcision and baptism—is what makes one fit to actively and believingly engage with Christ in the sacramental feast. For communion requires a heart that depends on and delights in the God of the gospel.

It is this believing activity—what it means to partake *worthily*—to which we now turn in the next chapter.

4. Covenant Provisos

God's covenant with us is initiated purely by His grace. We don't do anything to earn it or deserve it. The inception of this divine-human relationship is entirely one-sided. But the covenant sovereignly established by God places certain obligations upon us. It promises blessing with the proviso that we keep covenant.

Adam played no part in the establishment of the covenant between himself and God. He didn't have a say in the timing or the terms of the relationship. Had God chosen not to enter into a sacred bond with Adam, the first man couldn't have done anything to change that. But the sovereignly initiated covenant that held out blessing to Adam did so with the proviso of Adam's obedience. The covenant that was unconditional in its establishment was conditional in its continuance.

Adam failed to meet those conditions. He broke covenant, forfeiting life and coming under death. What exactly was the nature of Adam's covenant-breaking? He disdained God's covenant word (the prohibition) and misused God's covenant sign (the forbidden tree). It was arrogant unbelief that led him to abuse the sacramental fruit—eating in an unworthy manner and plunging the human race into death.

As with the covenant of works, the covenant of grace is one-sided in its initiation. But when we and our children are brought into it, it too places obligations upon us. Those obligations are different from those of the first covenant. For the covenant of works said, "Obey to obtain blessing," but the covenant of grace says, "Obtain blessing to obey." The proviso of the first covenant arrangement was meritorious obedience (doing in order to earn life), but the proviso of the second covenant arrangement is gracious obedience (freely receiving life in order to do). Nonetheless, the doing and obeying are absolutely vital, for the faith that receives God's free gift of life in the gospel is a "faith working through love" (Gal. 5:6). "For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead" (Jas. 2:26). Our failure to do the word evidences an unbelieving heart that disdains the word, regardless of what our lips might profess. And like Adam, if we disdain God's covenant word, we are sure to misuse and abuse God's covenant sign.

The most lengthy passage on the Lord's Supper in the Bible addresses just such a situation in the church at Corinth (1 Cor. 11:17–34). They were using the Table for their own selfish ends, failing to grapple with its spiritual significance by faith. Their unworthy partaking resulted in a meal intended to bless bringing curse—some of these church members even dying for their gross abuse of the bread and wine. It reminds us of the grave consequences of misusing the sacrament in unbelief, and it calls us to take care who is admitted to the Table.

But Who Decides and Upon What Basis?

Who has the authority to determine when our children are ready to partake? The answer the Bible gives is the elders of the church. As the first elders of the new covenant community (1 Pet. 5:1), Jesus entrusted the apostles with the keys of the kingdom (Matt. 16:19; 18:18). What do keys do? They open and close. With those keys, the kingdom is opened through the proclamation of the gospel in order that those who repent and believe it might be brought in. It is the elders of the local church who have been given authority by Christ to receive and welcome people into all the rights and privileges of the covenant community upon the basis of a credible profession of faith. Those rights and privileges include coming to the Table.

As parents, we bear the primary responsibility of raising our children in the faith, and we also play a vital role in discerning their readiness to profess that faith. But ultimately, it is the elders of the local church who have the authority to admit them to the Table.

Elders are fallible men. They cannot see hearts to determine whether one is savingly united to Christ and enjoying the internal benefits and blessings of His mediatorial work. But they are called to do their best to discern that this is indeed the case as they bring people into membership and welcome them to the Table. They do that by looking for a credible profession of faith—that is, a clear confession of gospel truth personally applied, not contradicted in any significant way by the individual's life. It is upon this basis that our children, who are members of the covenant community via baptism, are admitted to the Table. In this way, they go from being non-communing members to being communing members as they publicly declare their faith before the gathered church under the oversight of the elders.

This is the one proviso attached to the covenant meal: our children must, by faith, move from merely enjoying the external covenant privileges to enjoying the internal covenant privileges. They must own Christ for themselves, becoming sincere disciples who see, savor, and serve Him.

Sometimes in the history of the church, a certain age has been set for when profession of faith and admittance to the Table ought to occur (this has been true among both credobaptists and paedobaptists). But in the language adopted by the 55th General Assembly of the OPC, "the requirement of the Scriptures and our subordinate standards for meaningful participation in the Lord's Supper is not age, but a faith that confesses, discerns, remembers, and proclaims the body of Christ while partaking." It is unhelpful and even harmful for the elders of the church to set an age requirement for profession of faith, as if a certain number of birthdays renders one fit for the Table.

Every child is unique, and some will be ready earlier than others. Every family is also unique, each shaped by different ecclesiastical traditions which might incline them toward younger or older profession. There is some measure of freedom here.

Yet age is not a matter of complete indifference. As the Larger Catechism states, the Lord's Supper is to be administered "only to such as are of years and ability to examine themselves" (A. 177). Our standards assume that a plurality of years is requisite for a person to have the mental, psychological, and spiritual constitution necessary to partake rightly. But they wisely speak of "years" in the plural without attaching a particular number to those years. Admittance to the Table should be handled on a case-by-case basis, looking not for a certain age, but for a true and lively faith in Christ. For the activity required of the human party in this sacrament is twofold—believing examination and believing appropriation.

Believing Examination

The apostle exhorts those coming to the Table, "Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup" (1 Cor. 11:28). There is a necessary inward turn that needs to happen. This is an examination of the self. Self-examination can easily become a kind of self-focused, morbid introspection. We certainly want to avoid this. Instead, we are called to examine

ourselves to ensure that we are trusting in Christ, not ourselves, as we come to the Table. For worthy partaking is believing partaking.

Listen to how the Directory for Public Worship puts it: “It is one thing to eat and drink in a worthy manner. It is very different, however, to imagine that we are worthy to eat and drink. We dare not come to the Lord’s Table as if we were worthy and righteous in ourselves. We come in a worthy manner if we recognize that we are unworthy sinners who need our Savior” (III, C.3). By looking at our hearts and lives, we are seeking to discern if there is a repentant acknowledgement of our sin and unworthiness and a believing sense of our absolute need of Christ to make us worthy. As the Shorter Catechism states, “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. 97).

As we consider the readiness of our children to come to the Table, let us ask the following questions to discern if they are prepared to give themselves to such believing examination:

- Does he or she have the mental capacity and spiritual maturity requisite for self-examination, even if in the most elementary of ways?
- Does he or she grasp with both mind and heart his or her unworthiness to commune with God due to sin?
- Does he or she grasp with both mind and heart what Christ has done to make sinners worthy to dwell with God?

As you consider these questions, don’t just answer them with a simple yes or no—provide evidence from the lips and life of your child to support your answers. Are they prepared to believingly examine themselves so as to actively and worthily engage in the Lord’s Supper?

Believing Appropriation

Examining the self is only to the end of ensuring that there is a Christward faith operative in the heart. Without such faith, the sacrament will be misused and abused. For what is the purpose of

this sacrament but to deepen the communion believers have with Christ—a fellowship enjoyed only by Spirit-worked faith, and never without it.

By faith, we look back and remember what Christ has done, as His broken body and spilt blood are signified in the bread and wine (Lk. 22:19). By faith, we look forward with confident expectation to the eschatological feast we will enjoy with Christ on the last day, of which this bread and wine is but a foretaste (Matt. 26:29). By faith, we proclaim to one another in our eating and drinking, “The crucified and risen Christ is our Savior and King!” (1 Cor. 11:26). By faith, we discern Christ’s physical body signified in the elements and His ecclesiastical body unified around this shared meal (1 Cor. 11:29). In short, we meet Christ at the Table by faith and experience the joy of soul-satisfying, heart-strengthening fellowship with Him and one another as we believingly appropriate His gospel grace afresh and anew.

We do well to reflect on the teaching of the Larger Catechism at this point: “It is required of them that receive the sacrament of the Lord’s supper, that, during the time of the administration of it, with all holy reverence and attention they wait upon God in that ordinance, diligently observe the sacramental elements and actions, heedfully discern the Lord’s body, and affectionately meditate on his death and sufferings, and thereby stir up themselves to a vigorous exercise of their graces; in judging themselves, and sorrowing for sin; in earnest hungering and thirsting after Christ, feeding on him by faith, receiving of his fullness, trusting in his merits, rejoicing in his love, giving thanks for his grace; in renewing of their covenant with God, and love to all the saints” (A. 174). Discerning Christ. Meditating on Christ. Hungering after Christ. Feeding on Christ. Receiving Christ’s fullness. Trusting Christ’s merits. Rejoicing in Christ’s love. Giving thanks for Christ’s grace. All of these characteristics of worthy partaking are impossible without faith.

The activeness to which this sign of covenant ratification calls us and our children is the activeness of Christward faith. So we can ask of our children:

- Are there evident and encouraging signs that they are believingly appropriating the gospel in their lives?
- Do they possess a gospel understanding and faith that would enable them to fulfill the imperatives of remembering, proclaiming, and discerning as they partake?

- Do they display a joy, gratitude, and submission to Christ for His saving work and a desire to meet with Him and know Him better?

These are the marks of a child who is experiencing and enjoying the internal, spiritual blessings and benefits of the covenant of grace. These are the marks of a child who is ready to meet with the elders for the purpose of publicly professing his or her faith and coming to the Table. For the Children's Catechism, asking, "Who may rightly partake of the Lord's Supper?" answers, "Those who repent of their sins, trust in Christ, live a godly life, and profess their faith before the Church" (Q&A 140). When Christward repentance, trust, and godliness are evident, public profession unto the Table ought to follow—leading to the deepening of that repentance, trust, and godliness through communion with Christ.

5. Covenant Pledge

One of the joys of being a pastor is having a front-row seat at weddings. Sometimes it feels almost too close for comfort as I lead both man and woman in making the most significant relational commitment imaginable—vowing to give their hearts and bodies to one another, come what may, until death.

Why do we take vows at weddings? It's not because the Bible commands us to, nor because we are given examples of such in Scripture. When God officiated the first wedding between Adam and Eve, did it entail vows? We simply aren't told. But given the weighty significance of the marriage covenant, Christian tradition has understood that marital vows are most fitting at the inception of a marriage, as the man and the woman pledge themselves to one another in exclusive, enduring devotion.

So too, every communing member of our church is required to take vows as they are publicly received. This includes our children when they make a profession of faith. In our tradition, formal vows are the mechanism for publicly professing gospel conviction and commitment. But why? While the Bible gives us various examples of vows (e.g., Lev. 7:16; Num. 6:2), it nowhere explicitly commands—or even appears to commend—the practice of taking vows when coming into the church. Nor has the Presbyterian tradition always practiced this. In fact, membership vows do not appear in American Presbyterianism until the late nineteenth century.

We do not blush at this admission, nor do we assert that vows are absolutely necessary for a person to become a member of the visible church (any more than we would assert that you can't be married without vows). But given the covenantal nature of the Christian faith and the church, we believe vows are most fitting when one is professing his or her faith and entering into full communicant membership in the church.

But Wasn't Jesus Against Oaths and Vows?

The Old Testament does not stutter in making clear that oaths and vows are binding. "If you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay fulfilling it" (Deut. 23:21; cf. Num. 30:2). It

also makes clear that such pledges are to be made in God's name (Lev. 19:2; Deut. 10:20). Thus, the keeping of an oath or vow is a third commandment issue (not taking God's name in vain) as much as it is a ninth commandment issue (not lying). Vows are serious. In the language of our Confession, we "ought duly to consider the weightiness of so solemn an act" before making such a public pledge (22.3).

But the Jewish leaders in the first century had seriously distorted the biblical teaching on oaths and vows to serve their deceit. Since God had said, "You shall not swear *by my name* falsely" (Lev. 19:2; emphasis mine), rabbinic tradition taught that as long as God's name wasn't invoked in the oath, it was less binding—and in some cases, not binding at all. That was what Jesus was addressing when He declared, "But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King" (Matt. 5:34–35).

He references three places that were commonly invoked in oaths thought to be less binding—heaven, earth, and Jerusalem. But Jesus is not impressed by the hair-splitting distinctions of the Jews. Heaven is God's throne, earth is His footstool, and Jerusalem is His city (Isa. 66:1; Ps. 48:2). The Jews thought they could uphold the law of Moses while committing perjury and deceit through their fine distinctions, but they weren't fooling God. Followers of Christ must not follow in their steps, taking the name of the Lord in vain with lying pledges. They must have dependable lips, speak the truth always, and follow through with their commitments (Matt. 5:37).

When Jesus commands, "Do not take an oath at all," He is not forbidding His disciples from taking any and every kind of oath or vow. In the historical context, He is addressing oaths made flippantly, deceitfully, and even blasphemously in ordinary social interactions. There is a time for serious swearing before God, as the apostle makes clear (2 Cor. 1:23; Gal. 1:20; 1 Thess. 5:27). In contrast to the unrighteous Jews in Jesus' day, the righteous man is one "who swears to his own hurt and does not change" (Ps. 15:4). Before a pledge escapes his lips, he heeds Solomon's warning: "When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay" (Eccl. 5:4–5).

God's Sworn Promise in the Gospel

It is easy to forget that the gospel depends upon a divine oath (Ps. 110:4; 132:11). Our God is one who swears and then carries out His pledge in perfect faithfulness. This is what led Zechariah to bless God, for “the oath that he swore to our father Abraham” was being fulfilled in the coming of the Messiah (Lk. 1:73). Speaking of this very oath to Abraham, the preacher to the Hebrews tells us that since there was none greater by whom He could swear, God swore by Himself (Heb. 6:17).

The gospel rests on the fact that God has sworn by His name and has kept His covenant commitment. If God swears oaths, it would be strange for those recreated in His image to be prohibited from swearing oaths in every circumstance. Furthermore, if the divine party in the covenant of grace makes a formal commitment in the form of a sworn promise, would it not be fitting for the human party to do the same?

The Westminster Confession states that, along with the ordinary elements of public worship, “religious oaths, vows, solemn fastings, and thanksgivings” are also fitting “upon special occasions” (21.5). It is hard to imagine a more special occasion than publicly professing one’s confidence in Christ and commitment to Him and His people. In our non-committal age, vows remind us and our children that it is no light matter to be covenanted to God and one another through Christ. They impress upon us the fact that faith in Christ brings us into an exclusive and enduring communion bond that calls for whole-souled commitment—not only in this life, but unto eternity.

Furthermore, given the temptations that abound on this earthly pilgrimage and the indwelling sin that plagues even the strongest believers, vows serve to guard against compromise and apostasy. By them, “we more strictly bind ourselves to necessary duties” (Westminster Confession of Faith 22.6), and in so doing, we more strictly bind ourselves to God in Christ.

The Substance of Membership Vows

The vows our children make upon their profession of faith are all “necessary duties” for the Christian. The first three questions entail a formal commitment to uphold and continue in the central, non-negotiable truths of the Christian faith:

- “Do you believe the Bible, consisting of the Old and New Testaments, to be the Word of God, and its doctrine of salvation to be the perfect and only true doctrine of salvation?”
- “Do you believe in one living and true God, in whom eternally there are three distinct persons—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit—who are the same in being and equal in power and glory, and that Jesus Christ is God the Son, come in the flesh?”
- “Do you confess that because of your sinfulness you abhor and humble yourself before God, that you repent of your sin, and that you trust for salvation not in yourself but in Jesus Christ alone?”

The final two questions call our children to faithfully serve Christ in all of life and in the local church:

- “Do you acknowledge Jesus Christ as your sovereign Lord, and do you promise that, in reliance on the grace of God, you will serve him with all that is in you, forsake the world, resist the devil, put to death your sinful deeds and desires, and lead a godly life?”
- “Do you promise to participate faithfully in this church’s worship and service, to submit in the Lord to its government, and to heed its discipline, even in case you should be found delinquent in doctrine or life?”

None of these things are optional for the healthy disciple of Jesus. By saying “I do” to each question, faith is being professed with the understanding that it entails both gospel conviction *and* gospel commitment. Through the mechanism of vows, our children are more strictly bound to keep covenant with God through Spirit-worked faith in Christ and gracious obedience to His word. When performed sincerely, this is good and pleasing in the sight of God.

Feeling the Weight of Covenant Commitment

The second part of *Prepared to Partake* aims at equipping you to unpack the truths of the five membership vows with your child as you prepare him or her to make a profession of faith. But

before we get there, it is vital that we allow the weight of covenant vows to press down upon our souls as parents. We need to ensure that our children are capable of making vows, lest we become culpable for them being trivialized.

Once again, the Westminster Confession of Faith helpfully summarizes the biblical teaching: “A vow is of the like nature with a promissory oath, and ought to be made with the like religious care, and to be performed with the like faithfulness. It is not to be made to any creature, but to God alone: and, that it may be accepted, it is to be made voluntarily, out of faith, and conscience of duty, in way of thankfulness for mercy received, or for the obtaining of what we want, whereby we more strictly bind ourselves to necessary duties; or, to other things, so far and so long as they may fitly conduce thereunto” (22.5–6). In light of these truths, we must ask concerning our children:

- Do they evidence a healthy fear of God that would lead them to take vows with “religious care”?
- Have they expressed a desire to make public profession so that these vows would be “made voluntarily” and “out of faith”—not in response to pressure from parents or a desire to merely please parents or follow peers?
- Do they possess the maturity of mind and conscience necessary to understand their duty before God and to “more strictly bind” themselves to it?

In short, we must ensure that our children grasp—even in a child-like way—the weightiness of taking vows before God in the public assembly. Their readiness to formally pledge themselves to God and His people is an evidence of their readiness to come to the Table. For if they trifle with vows, they will almost certainly treat the sacramental bread and wine lightly. But when, in response to God’s sworn commitment spoken in the gospel and confirmed in their baptism, they formally commit themselves to Christ and His body in faith and obedience, then they are ready to partake of the sacramental feast and enjoy communion with the Lord they love.

PART TWO
Covenantal Faith

6. Covenant Communication

In the ancient Near East, a greater king, known as a suzerain, would enter into a covenant with a lesser king, known as a vassal. The relationship would be articulated in a written treaty, authoritatively given by the suzerain to the vassal. Those words explained the history, terms, and goal of the relationship. Without such words, there would have been no covenant.

In the covenant between God and His people, words are fundamental. That was true in the covenant of works with Adam (Gen. 2:16–17), and it is true in every administration of the covenant of grace (Gen. 3:15; Gen. 9:1–17; Gen. 12:1–3; Exod. 19:4–6; 2 Sam. 7:12–14; Jer. 31:31–34). It is no exaggeration to say that without God’s spoken or written word, there would be no covenant between God and humans (or if there was, we could know nothing about it).

Is it any wonder that the devil aims his biggest guns at eroding our confidence in God’s verbal revelation? The breaking of the covenant of works began with a seed of satanic doubt being planted in Adam’s soul: “Did God actually say?” (Gen. 3:1). Our fall from God emerged in unbelief, and our return to God arises through the gracious restoration of belief: “For by grace you have been saved through faith” (Eph. 2:8).

This is why the membership vows begin with God’s covenant communication, asking, “Do you believe the Bible, consisting of the Old and New Testaments, to be the Word of God, and its doctrine of salvation to be the perfect and only true doctrine of salvation?” As with each of the five membership questions set forth in our Directory of Public Worship, this question actually asks multiple interrelated questions. As you discuss it with your child, it will help to unpack each part distinctly.

The Bible’s Nature

The question begins with what the Bible is: “Do you believe the Bible, consisting of the Old and New Testaments, to be the Word of God?” When our children make profession of faith, they are publicly declaring their faith in *the* faith revealed in the Bible. The bedrock of such a profession is the conviction that the Bible is no ordinary book. Yes, God used men to write it, but He so came

upon those men as they wrote that what they wrote was nothing less than the authoritative word of God.

This is known as the doctrine of inspiration. By it, we don't mean that the Bible is inspiring like a moving motivational speech (though it certainly does inspire the believing heart!). The word *inspiration* comes from the King James translation of 2 Timothy 3:16: "All scripture is given by inspiration of God." The Greek literally reads, "All scripture is God-breathed." For the Bible to be inspired simply means that the Bible proceeds from the very mouth of God as He breathed it forth by His Spirit. Our forefathers spoke of the two testaments being the two lips by which God speaks to His people. From Genesis to Revelation, we are given God's covenant communication, which forms the bedrock of our relationship with Him, and apart from which we are in the dark.

How does your child treat the Bible? Does he reverence it? Does she receive and respond to it as the authoritative Word of the Lord, not as a book of pious ideas and suggestions of men? Does your child rejoice in the Bible, recognizing what a privilege it is to have God's covenant word? Does he or she desire to read and understand it, and delight to hear it taught and preached?

In Scripture

- 2 Timothy 3:14–16: "But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness."
- 2 Peter 1:19–21: "And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."

- Psalm 19:7–10: “The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the LORD are true, and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb.”

In Catechism

- FC Q. 15: *Who wrote the Bible?*
A. Chosen men who were inspired by the Holy Spirit.
- SC Q. 2: *What rule hath God given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him?*
A. The Word of God, which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him.
- SC Q. 3: *What do the Scriptures principally teach?*
A. The Scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.

In Conversation

- What makes the Bible different from every other book in the world?
- How could God be the author of the Bible when we know it was written by men?
- If someone were to tell you that the Bible is full of errors and mistakes, how would you respond?
- Since the Bible is God’s Word to us, how should we respond to it?

The Bible’s Message

The second part of the first membership vow focuses on the substance of what God communicates in the Scriptures: “Do you believe the Bible’s doctrine of salvation to be the perfect and only true doctrine of salvation?” From Genesis 3 to Revelation 22, God unfolds His purpose to restore humans to covenant relationship with Himself and to fulfill His original

purpose in the garden through a second Adam, Jesus Christ. When you consider the fact that these 66 books were written in diverse genres by various men in different times, cultures, languages, and circumstances, it is remarkable how perfectly unified the message of the Bible is, progressively unfolding the one and only way for sinful humans to be reconciled to the holy God of heaven and earth.

The Bible has a certain doctrine or teaching of salvation. It is a doctrine that differs from every other religion, as it sets before us a God who comes down to us and accomplishes salvation for us. The Scriptures call this doctrine “the gospel,” which simply means “the good news.” It’s helpful for us to unpack this term with our children. News is the recounting of significant events that have already taken place. The gospel uses words to tell us about the most important events in all of history. This is no ordinary news; the gospel is the best of all news! For it is the message of what God has done to save sinners through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We disobey God’s law, but Jesus perfectly obeyed in our place throughout the entirety of His life on earth. We deserve death and hell for our disobedience, but Jesus suffered death and hell in our place on the cross. We were banished from God’s life-giving presence, but Jesus rose from the dead to ascend into the heavenly presence of God as our representative and forerunner.

The perfect salvation revealed in the gospel is the only salvation there is. There is no other way for fallen humans to be rescued but by the mighty deeds of Christ in history (Acts 4:12). Without Him and His finished work, we are still in our sin, under God’s wrath, and subjected to eternal hell (Jn. 3:36). Without hearing and receiving the gospel through the Scriptures, no one can be reconciled to God (Rom. 10:14–17).

Does your child understand the basic truths of the gospel? Can she articulate the significance of Christ’s life of obedience, His death on the cross, and His resurrection from the dead? If asked about the way of salvation, would he focus on works he needs to do or on the work that Jesus has already done? Does your child evidence a desire for unbelievers in his or her life to know Jesus out of a recognition that there is no other way to be saved?

In Scripture

- 1 Corinthians 15:1–4: “Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.”
- 2 Corinthians 5:18–20: “All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.”
- John 14:6: “Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’”

In Catechism

- FC Q. 46: *How, then, can you be saved?*
A. By the Lord Jesus Christ through the covenant of grace.
- FC Q. 52: *What kind of life did Christ live on earth?*
A. A life of obedience, service and suffering.
- FC Q. 53: *What kind of death did Jesus die?*
A. The painful and shameful death of the cross.
- FC Q. 54: *What is meant by the atonement?*
A. Christ satisfied God's justice by his suffering and death as a substitute for sinners.
- SC Q. 20: *Did God leave all mankind to perish in the estate of sin and misery?*
A. God having, out of his mere good pleasure, from all eternity, elected some to everlasting life, did enter into a covenant of grace, to deliver them out of the estate of sin and misery, and to bring them into an estate of salvation by a redeemer.
- SC Q. 27: *Wherein did Christ's humiliation consist?*
A. Christ's humiliation consisted in his being born, and that in a low condition, made

under the law, undergoing the miseries of this life, the wrath of God, and the cursed death of the cross; in being buried, and continuing under the power of death for a time.

- SC Q. 28: *Wherein consisteth Christ's exaltation?*

A. Christ's exaltation consisteth in his rising again from the dead on the third day, in ascending up into heaven, in sitting at the right hand of God the Father, and in coming to judge the world at the last day.

In Conversation

- What does the word "gospel" mean?
- What is the good news revealed in the Bible?
- Why did Jesus have to die and rise from the dead for us to be saved?
- Is there only one way for our relationship with God to be fixed, or are there many different ways?

7. Covenant Companion

In the covenant of grace, God restores us to a loving communion bond with Himself. The greatest gift of the gospel is not forgiveness of sins; the greatest gift of the gospel is God Himself. “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6). The same Holy Spirit who inspired the Bible illuminates our souls to see the truth of God in the Bible, bringing us into a genuine and experiential knowledge and enjoyment of God. Sadly, many profess to be Christians while remaining profoundly ignorant of the most basic truths about who God is.

If I were to profess love for my wife and then proceed to talk about all the things I love about her—her blonde hair and blue eyes, her Broadway-worthy singing voice, her passion for tent camping, and her fly-by-the-seat-of-her-pants spontaneity—anyone who knows my wife would scratch their head in confusion. Tessa has brown hair and brown eyes. She is a first-rate writer, not a singer. She much prefers air conditioning and a mattress to the hard ground of a stuffy tent. Furthermore, she is one of the most organized people I know, with a schedule that is almost always strategically planned. How could I live in intimate union with this woman and be so profoundly ignorant of her? It’s impossible.

It is the same in our covenant with God—utter ignorance of who God is, is a sure sign that we are strangers to the covenant of grace. For the bond into which we are drawn through a believing reception of the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments intimately acquaints us with God Himself. While it is true that we never arrive in our knowledge of God (any more than I have learned all there is to know about my wife), it is also the case that saving faith in His word grants us a true perception of who He is.

That is why the membership vows move from God’s covenant communication in the Bible to God Himself as our covenant companion. The second question asks, “Do you believe in one living and true God, in whom eternally there are three distinct persons—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit—who are the same in being and equal in power and glory, and that Jesus Christ is God the Son, come in the flesh?” As with the first vow, there are two parts to this second one which we must think through carefully with our children.

The Triune God

The question begins with a call to affirm the doctrine of the Trinity: “Do you believe in one living and true God, in whom eternally there are three distinct persons—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit—who are the same in being and equal in power and glory?” The adjective *triune* communicates that the three distinct persons (*tri-*) exist as the singular God (*-une*). It is a reality proclaimed in our baptism as God puts His singular name upon us, which is mysteriously threefold: “baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19).

Christians do not believe in three gods, like the ancient Egyptians believed in Osiris, Isis, and Horus. The Bible is clear that there is only one living and true God, and every other so-called god is a dead and false idol. “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one” (Deut. 6:4). Christianity is monotheistic, forbidding us from dividing our worship among a multiplicity of deities. But in the mystery of God’s singular being are three distinct persons who always have been and always will be the one God.

As parents, we can be tempted to draw illustrations or analogies of the Trinity to help our children understand it. But we must refrain from doing this, since there is no created parallel to the triune nature of God. For example, some have said that God is like a singular egg made up of the shell, the white, and the yolk. But that is precisely what God is not like! The Father is not a part of God, like the shell of an egg; He is fully God. So too, the Son is not a part of God, like the egg white; He equally and eternally shares the divine essence with the Father and the Spirit.

The God we are united to in the covenant of grace is three-in-one and one-in-three. He is triune. It is a mystery we cannot fully comprehend. That ought to be a comfort to us, because if our finite minds could comprehend God, He would not be infinite in glory. We must embrace the mystery while also reckoning with the fact that we can know something of His triune glory because He has revealed it to us in His Word.

Does your child have a sound—even if simple—understanding of the Trinity? Is she comfortable praying to all three persons of the Godhead without thinking she is praying to three different gods? Does he show evidence of believing that Jesus is not a mere man, and that the

Holy Spirit is not a mere force, but that both are divine persons distinct from and equal to the Father?

In Scripture

- Deuteronomy 6:4–5: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”
- 1 Corinthians 8:6: “Yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.”
- Matthew 3:16–17: “And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.’”
- 2 Corinthians 13:14: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”

In Catechism

- FC Q. 6: *Is there more than one true God?*
A. No. There is only one true God.
- FC Q. 7: *In how many Persons does this one God exist?*
A. In three Persons.
- FC Q. 8: *Name these three Persons.*
A. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.
- SC Q. 5: *Are there more Gods than one?*
A. There is but one only, the living and true God.
- SC Q. 6: *How many persons are there in the godhead?*
A. There are three persons in the Godhead; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory.

In Conversation

- How many Gods are there?
- How many Persons are there in God? What are their names?
- Are we to pray to and worship all three Persons? Why, or why not?
- Can we fully understand the doctrine of the Trinity? Why is that a good thing?

The Incarnate Son

While God reveals Himself to us through the written Word, the clearest and fullest revelation He gives of Himself is in the incarnate Word, as the second Person of the Trinity—the Son of God—takes on human flesh to become the offspring of the woman who would crush the serpent’s head (Gen. 3:15), the offspring of Abraham who would spread God’s saving blessing to all nations (Gen. 12:3), and the offspring of David who would conquer God’s foes and reign forever (2 Sam. 7:13). That is why the second membership vow goes on to ask, “Do you believe that Jesus Christ is God the Son, come in the flesh?”

Since God does not have a physical form, being an infinite Spirit, we cannot see Him with our eyes. But when the divine Son of God became man, the invisible God became visible (Jn. 1:18). This is why Jesus could say, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn. 14:9). All our knowledge of God is mediated to us through the incarnate Son. For not only does Jesus reveal God to us, but He also is the only one fit to be the mediator between God and man as the one who is truly God and truly man in one Person (1 Tim. 2:5).

If the Son had never become man, there would be no way for us to be saved from sin and restored to God. We need a Savior who is fully man in order to represent us as He obeys the law we transgressed and dies for our transgressions. But since our transgressions are an infinite affront against the infinite God and therefore warrant infinite wrath, no mere human could make satisfaction for them. None save the infinite God could swallow up infinite wrath! So the Son of God sheds His infinitely-valuable blood to pay a debt we never could and to set us free.

The incarnation is central to the gospel because the good news is all about a person—Jesus Christ, the God-man. While the three persons of the Trinity share a singular divine nature,

the one person of the incarnate Son of God possesses two natures, divine and human. He who is eternal God became a true man for us and for our salvation.

Does your child understand why he needs a Savior who is both human and divine? Does she regularly refer and relate to Jesus as divine, or does she tend to view Him as merely a good guy or nice teacher? Could he articulate clearly the relationship between Christ's singular person and His two natures?

In Scripture

- John 1:1–3, 14: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made....And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”
- Galatians 4:4–5: “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.”
- Philippians 2:5–8: “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

In Catechism

- FC Q. 50: *How could Christ suffer?*
A. Christ, the Son of God, became a man so that he could obey and suffer in our place.
- SC Q. 21: *Who is the redeemer of God's elect?*
A. The only redeemer of God's elect is the Lord Jesus Christ, who, being the eternal Son of God, became man, and so was, and continueth to be, God and man in two distinct natures, and one person, forever.

- SC Q. 22: *How did Christ, being the Son of God, become man?*

A. Christ, the Son of God, became man, by taking to himself a true body and a reasonable soul, being conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost in the womb of the virgin Mary, and born of her, yet without sin.

In Conversation

- Who is Jesus?
- How is Jesus different from us? How is He like us?
- Was the Son of God created?
- Did the Son stop being God when He became man?
- Since Jesus is both God and man, does that mean He is two persons?
- Why do we need a Savior who is both God and man?

8. Covenant Conversion

It is not enough to have God's covenant communication in the Scriptures, wherein He offers to be our covenant companion. Many are external members of the covenant who have God's Word, can articulate the gospel, and can quote catechism answers regarding God's triunity and Christ's incarnation, and yet, in their hearts, they continue to reject God in Christ.

As Christian parents, we can be tempted to presume upon our child's right standing with God simply because he was baptized and is in church. But the words of our Lord to a member of the old covenant community apply just as much to us and our children under the new covenant: "You must be born again" (Jn. 3:7).

A mere external attachment to God and His people through the sacrament of baptism and the externals of religious profession and practice cannot bring about the needed change. Only the Holy Spirit can, as He takes God's Word to convict us of our sin, bringing us to the end of ourselves so that we might turn to Christ for rescue. That is, in fact, what the baptismal waters signify—we need the cleansing and regenerating work of the Spirit of Christ, applying the gospel to our souls if we are to be delivered from our idols and become a part of God's new creation. When Jesus told Nicodemus of his need to be "born of water and the Spirit" (Jn. 3:5), He was alluding to Ezekiel's great prophecy of the new covenant wherein God promised: "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules" (Ezek. 36:25–27).

We might be members in good standing in the visible church, but if we are without the soul-transforming work of the Spirit through the gospel, we are without God and without hope. True reconciliation to God requires covenant conversion—turning from our unbelieving devotion to idols in believing devotion to the true and living God. That is why the third membership question asks: "Do you confess that because of your sinfulness you abhor and humble yourself before God, that you repent of your sin, and that you trust for salvation not in yourself but in

Jesus Christ alone?” Once again, there are multiple questions within this vow that we must unpack with our children.

Conviction of Sin

It begins with an admission of our fallen condition in Adam: “Do you confess that because of your sinfulness you abhor and humble yourself before God?” Before our children can understand their need for the good news, they must first understand the bad news. What is the bad news exactly? That they are sinners who have inherited the guilt and corruption of Adam’s sin.

We must teach our children God’s law—not only so they might know the way God desires them to live, but also so that they might see just how far short they fall of God’s righteous standard. They don’t merely have the guilt of Adam’s first sin imputed to them (Rom. 5:12–21); they themselves have committed countless sins that render them guilty (Rom. 3:10, 23). And the reason they came from the womb sinning is that they were conceived in sin, born with a fallen heart bent toward idolatry and adverse toward God (Ps. 51:5; Matt. 15:19). By nature, humanity is enslaved to sin, tirelessly serving it in hostile rejection of the Triune God (Rom. 6:17).

Our sin warrants covenant curse (Gen. 2:17; Rom. 6:23). That curse is epitomized in a threefold death:

1. Physical death: cessation of bodily life.
2. Spiritual death: separation from God.
3. Eternal death: subjection to hell.

In Adam, we are spiritually dead and subject to physical death, which will usher us into eternal death. If that sounds bleak, it’s because it is. But it is reality—and if we train ourselves and our children to deny reality, we are setting our families up for a multigenerational catastrophe. For it is only when we are convinced of the guilt and power of sin and the death it subjects us to that we will begin to look for salvation outside of ourselves. It is only as we are brought low by the righteousness of the law that we are prepared to be lifted up by the grace of the gospel.

Sometimes people struggle with the verb “abhor” in this vow. Our culture of self-esteem and positive thinking doesn’t have a category for a right kind of abhorrence toward the self. But

the call here is not a hatred of the self, but a loathing of the *sinful* self. We detest the way we have lived as rebels against God, and humbly confess our sin, acknowledging that we deserve curse. This is the great prerequisite to conversion.

Does your child understand that by nature he or she is not good? Does she see that her sinful words and actions are not ultimately against other people but against God Himself? Does he show an understanding of the heart's role in the struggle with sin? What signs are there in your child's life of genuine conviction of sin and the curse it warrants?

In Scripture

- Ephesians 2:1–3: “And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.”
- Romans 3:23: “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”
- Psalm 51:4–5: “Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment. Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.”
- 1 John 3:4: “Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness” [walk them through the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20:1–17 to illustrate this].

In Catechism

- FC Q. 29: *What is sin?*
A. Sin is any lack of conformity to, or transgression of, the law of God.
- FC Q. 30: *What is meant by lack of conformity?*
A. Not being or doing what God requires.
- FC Q. 31: *What is meant by transgression?*
A. Doing what God forbids.

- FC Q. 32: *What does every sin deserve?*
A. The wrath and curse of God.
- FC Q. 37: *What effect did the sin of Adam have on all people?*
A. We are all born guilty and sinful.
- SC Q. 14: *What is sin?*
A. Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God.
- SC Q. 16: *Did all mankind fall in Adam's first transgression?*
A. The covenant being made with Adam, not only for himself, but for his posterity; all mankind, descending from him by ordinary generation, sinned in him, and fell with him, in his first transgression.
- SC Q. 19: *What is the misery of that estate whereinto man fell?*
A. All mankind by their fall lost communion with God, are under his wrath and curse, and so made liable to all the miseries in this life, to death itself, and to the pains of hell forever.
- SC Q. 82: *Is any man able perfectly to keep the commandments of God?*
A. No mere man since the fall is able in this life perfectly to keep the commandments of God, but doth daily break them in thought, word and deed.

In Conversation

- What is sin, and why is it so serious?
- Can you think of a time when you did not obey God with your words or acts?
- Where do all our sinful words and acts arise from?
- What does our sin deserve? Why does it deserve such a heavy punishment?
- Why must we receive the bad news about our sin before we can receive the good news of God's gospel?

Conversion to Christ

The second part of the third vow asks: "Do you confess that you repent of your sin and trust for salvation not in yourself but in Jesus Christ alone?" It is one thing to be convicted of sin, but it is

another thing entirely for that conviction to lead us to turn from our sin in repentance and toward Jesus Christ in faith. Conviction must lead to conversion as the orientation of the soul shifts Christward. Only then can a sinner be delivered from the guilt and power of sin and reconciled to the triune God in covenant union and communion. True conversion, which is always the result of the Holy Spirit's regenerating grace, entails two interconnected acts—repentance and faith.

After the law exposes our sin, the gospel calls us to repent of that sin (Acts 2:37–38). Repentance entails a change of mind and heart about our rebellion. By God's grace, we come to detest the idols our hearts once delighted in. That internal change leads to a change in life, as we forsake and turn away from those counterfeit gods. So long as our souls are trusting in idols, we cannot trust in Christ. Before the hands of our soul can be free to grab hold of Christ for salvation, we must cast down the false gods we look to for satisfaction and salvation. So we turn from sin, but that turning is always a turning to God through Christ. We join the ranks of those who "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God" (1 Thess. 1:9). That is why repentance must be inseparably wed to faith.

Faith is the soul's receiving of the incarnate, crucified, and risen Christ through the gospel for salvation (Rom. 1:16–17). Faith involves knowing about and assenting to the truth of Christ and His finished work, but it entails much more than that (Jas. 1:19). By faith, the soul personally appropriates Christ and His finished work (Gal. 2:20). Faith does not in itself save, but it lays hold of the only one who can save, so that through attachment to the crucified and risen Christ the sinner is delivered from the penalty of sin in justification (Rom. 4–5) and the power of sin in sanctification (Rom. 6).

Saving faith confesses from the heart: "I am unrighteous, but the sinless Christ is my righteousness. I am condemned, but Christ was condemned in my place at the cross. I deserve death, but Christ has risen up victorious over the grave for me. I am unfit to live with God, but Christ has done everything needed for me to be reconciled to God through the new covenant in His blood."

Are there signs of genuine conversion in your child's life? When corrected or disciplined for sinful behavior, does he show grief over sin and a turning from it? Are there signs of true

repentance in her life? Has your child been delivered from trust in self for salvation, grasping that he or she desperately needs Jesus? Can you think of recent evidences of her personally trusting in Christ or delighting in His gospel grace toward her?

In Scripture

- Acts 17:30–31: “The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”
- Romans 2:4: “Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?”
- 1 Thessalonians 1:9–10: “For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.”
- Acts 16:30–31: “Then he brought them out and said, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’ And they said, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.’”
- Romans 5:1: “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

In Catechism

- FC Q. 58: *What must you do to be saved?*
A. I must repent of my sin and believe in Christ as my Savior.
- FC Q. 59: *How do you repent of your sin?*
A. I must be sorry for my sin, and hate and forsake it.
- FC Q. 60: *Why must you hate and forsake your sin?*
A. Because sin displeases God.

- FC Q. 61: *What does it mean to believe in Christ?*
A. To trust in Christ alone for my salvation.
- FC Q. 62: *Can you repent and believe in Christ by your own power?*
A. No. I cannot repent and believe unless the Holy Spirit changes my heart.
- FC Q. 63: *How can you get the help of the Holy Spirit?*
A. God has told us to pray for the Holy Spirit's help.
- SC Q. 85: *What doth God require of us that we may escape his wrath and curse due to us for sin?*
A. To escape the wrath and curse of God due to us for sin, God requireth of us faith in Jesus Christ, repentance unto life, with the diligent use of all the outward means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption.
- SC Q. 86: *What is faith in Jesus Christ?*
A. Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace, whereby we receive and rest upon him alone for salvation, as he is offered to us in the gospel.
- SC Q. 87: *What is repentance unto life?*
A. Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience.
- SC Q. 33: *What is justification?*
A. Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.
- SC Q. 34: *What is adoption?*
A. Adoption is an act of God's free grace, whereby we are received into the number, and have a right to all the privileges of, the sons of God.

In Conversation

- Why is it not enough to feel sorry for our sin?
- What does it mean to repent? What must we turn from, and what must we turn toward?

- Can you think of a time when you repented? If so, what did it look like?
- What does it mean to believe in Jesus? Is it enough to know that Jesus is the Son of God who died for sin and rose from the dead?
- Does our repentance and faith save us? Why, or why not?
- Do we only repent and believe one time, or do we need to repent and believe all throughout our lives?

9. Covenant Consecration

We are restored to a right relationship with God through Spirit-worked, Christ-directed repentance and faith. Through the gospel, God becomes ours. But through that same gospel, we become God's. "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body" (1 Cor. 6:19–20). This is why the Bible frequently refers to God's people as "saints" or "holy ones" (e.g., Dan. 7:18; Rom. 1:7). Holy objects are separated from the world to be devoted to God. Through Christ, that is precisely what happens to us—we now belong to the God who is our joy and crown, offering up the entirety of our redeemed humanity to Jesus in consecration.

To our age, which prizes radical autonomy and liberation from objective norms and external authority, holiness sounds like bondage. But the Scriptures make clear what every saint has tasted in reality—we are only free as we live according to our design. As the image of God, true freedom is found in glorifying and enjoying the God we image as we submit to His law. And it is only as we are recreated after that image in Christ that we can experience that joyous liberation (Eph. 4:23–24; Col. 3:10).

The devil's lie from the beginning has been that God is a cruel tyrant, and that true liberty is found only by casting off the shackles of His authority and His authoritative word. As parents, we are responsible to show our children with our lives and lips that nothing could be further from the truth. Submitting to and serving God in Christ is true liberty and the path to joyous life! We must call them to join us in whole-souled service to the Lord. For true conversion always results in covenant consecration, which is what the fourth membership vow beckons us to when it asks, "Do you acknowledge Jesus Christ as your sovereign Lord, and do you promise that, in reliance on the grace of God, you will serve him with all that is in you, forsake the world, resist the devil, put to death your sinful deeds and desires, and lead a godly life?" There are again two dimensions to this weighty question, as our service to Christ entails no longer serving sin.

Serving the King

The first part of the fourth vow asks, “Do you acknowledge Jesus Christ as your sovereign Lord, and do you promise that in reliance on the grace of God, you will serve him with all that is in you and lead a godly life?” This vow often gives pause to those preparing to profess their faith—and rightfully so! For by it, we are binding ourselves to live entirely for Jesus Christ as our King.

A dangerous error that has threatened the church in every age is that since salvation is by grace alone, it doesn’t matter how we live. Some go so far as to say that we can receive Christ as our Savior without receiving Him as our Lord. But the Scriptures teach us otherwise! For the Christ we receive in the gospel is the whole Christ, who not only propitiates the wrath of God as our Priest but also rules over us as our King. You cannot receive Christ as Priest to be cleansed from sin without also consecrating yourself to Him as King. For Christ’s mediatorial office cannot be divided. You either receive the whole of Him or none of Him. This is why the gospel comes with the humbling call: “Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him” (Ps. 2:11–12).

To put it another way, the repentance and faith of true conversion necessarily lead to a godly life of service to Jesus. For we don’t repent of our sin in conversion only to turn back to it as slaves. The Christian life is one of daily repentance—grieving, forsaking, and turning from the sin that clings so closely. It is one that can say with the apostle, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20). The Christian life is lived by faith in Christ, and as Paul goes on to explain, it is a “faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6), and that “love is the fulfilling of the law” (Rom. 13:10). When the gospel overtakes a person, the kingdom of Christ extends into their hearts, leading them to imperfectly, yet sincerely, serve Jesus.

Does your son or daughter confess Jesus as Lord? Is there an evident desire in her heart to be holy? Does he pray and ask God for grace to be more like Jesus? Is daily repentance and faith evident in your child’s life?

In Scripture

- Philippians 2:12–13: “Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”
- 1 Corinthians 6:9–11: “Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”
- Ephesians 2:8–10: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”
- 1 John 3:16–18: “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.”

In Catechism

- FC Q. 72: *How is Christ your king?*
A. Christ rules over me, the world and Satan, and he defends me.
- FC Q. 108: *Of what use are the Ten Commandments to you?*
A. They teach me what is pleasing to God, and how much I need a Savior.
- FC Q. 80: *What do the Ten Commandments teach?*
A. To love God with all my heart, and my neighbor as myself.
- FC Q. 77: *Why should we obey the Ten Commandments?*
A. Because God is our Creator, Savior and King.

- SC Q. 26: *How doth Christ execute the office of a king?*
A. Christ executeth the office of a king, in subduing us to himself, in ruling and defending us, and in restraining and conquering all his and our enemies.
- SC Q. 42: *What is the sum of the ten commandments?*
A. The sum of the ten commandments is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength, and with all our mind; and our neighbor as ourselves.
- SC Q. 88: *What are the outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption?*
A. The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption, are his ordinances, especially the word, sacraments, and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for salvation.

In Conversation

- Can we have Christ as our Savior without having Him as our Lord? Why, or why not?
- What does it mean for Jesus to be King, and how should His kingship change the way we live?
- Where are we told what a godly life looks like? What is the one word that summarizes godliness, and can you give an example of what it looks like in action?
- Where must we look to find strength to live in godliness?
- Why is having Jesus as our King a good thing? Wouldn't it be better for you to be your own master?

Warring Against Sin

Having been brought into Christ's kingdom, we are now at odds with the kingdom of darkness and must actively fight against it. So the second part of the fourth membership vow asks, "Do you promise that, in reliance on the grace of God, you will forsake the world, resist the devil, and put to death your sinful deeds and desires?" Theologians have long noted that there is an unholy trinity that ever seeks to turn us against the holy Trinity—the world, the devil, and the flesh. As Christ's holy people, we are called to take up spiritual arms against the forces of darkness, the

most dangerous of which lives within our own chests (i.e., remaining sin, which the Scriptures often refer to as “the flesh”).

The process of sanctification, whereby we grow to live more for God and become more like Jesus, entails dying more and more to sin as we put it to death through the Spirit’s power (Rom. 8:13). We do this by resisting the temptations of the devil and the world through faith in God’s truth (Matt. 4:1–11; Jas. 4:7). The Bible is the only weapon we have in this spiritual fight, and we wield it in prayerful dependence upon God (Eph. 6:17–18).

The faithful follower of Christ will have a warfare mentality, recognizing that at every moment there are spiritual forces seeking to undo her devotion to Jesus. But she will not attempt to fight the daily battle in her own strength, knowing that she is only “strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might” (Eph. 6:10).

Does your child evidence an awareness of the spiritual battle at hand? Are there recent examples in which he has mortified sin or said no to temptation? Does she actively resist rebellion, or does she tend to passively resign herself to sinful desires? Is the world effective in alluring your child, or does he or she show at least some measure of freedom from the love of this godless age?

In Scripture

- James 4:7: “Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”
- Ephesians 6:10–12: “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”
- James 4:4: “You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.”

- Romans 8:12–13: “So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.”
- Titus 2:11–12: “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age.”

In Catechism

- FC Q. 34: *Who tempted Adam and Eve to this sin?*
A. Satan tempted Eve first, and then he used her to tempt Adam.
- FC Q. 75: *Why do you need Christ as your king?*
A. Because I am weak and helpless.
- SC Q. 35: *What is sanctification?*
A. Sanctification is the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.
- SC Q. 102: *What do we pray for in the second petition?*
A. In the second petition, which is, Thy kingdom come, we pray that Satan’s kingdom may be destroyed; and that the kingdom of grace may be advanced, ourselves and others brought into it, and kept in it; and that the kingdom of glory may be hastened.

In Conversation

- What are the three enemies of the Christian?
- How specifically do the world, the devil, and the flesh tempt us to deny Jesus?
- What weapon has God given us in our fight against the world, the devil, and the flesh?
- Since the Bible is our only weapon in the fight, what should we do to ensure we are always ready to wield it?
- What does it mean to put to death our sinful deeds and desires? Can you give an example of what this would look like in real life?

10. Covenant Communion

Given the radically individualistic society in which we live, it is easy for us to conceive of the covenant of grace as a “me and Jesus” kind of thing. The Scriptures do promote a healthy individualism, reckoning with the fact that each one of us is personally accountable to God and that God’s salvation and judgment come to individuals. In contrast to certain collectivist societies, the Bible never loses the individual in the collective and communal. But from the first pages of Genesis, we see that the humans created to reflect their relational God cannot thrive in isolation. In His very good creation, one reality was deemed not good—Adam’s aloneness (Gen. 2:18). So God created the woman from out of man and officiated the first wedding (Gen. 2:22–25). It was a relationship that served as a creaturely picture of the covenant affection and devotion enjoyed between God and His church (Eph. 5:22–33). God doesn’t covenant with bare individuals, but with individuals who are united to one another through their shared union with Christ. The covenant of grace is ultimately not a “me and God” relationship, but an “us and God” relationship. A churchless disciple is a contradiction of terms.

Even one look at the Great Commission makes that clear (Matt. 28:18–20). The church, as a renewed Israel (signified in the twelve foundational apostolic leaders), is to go out with the gospel to make disciples so that a great multitude that no one can number from every nation, tribe, and language might follow and serve Christ. When, through faith, the gospel is received, those converts are to be baptized, bringing them into the covenant community where they are then taught the whole of Christ’s word. Christ does not will the Christian to worship, walk, and witness alone, but to be knit together in a loving community of fellow Christians who support, encourage, and hold one another accountable as they grow to be more faithful followers of Jesus. We need the fellowship of the saints (a theme deemed so important our Confession devotes an entire chapter to it—see Westminster Confession ch. 26). We need covenant communion not merely with God, but with other believers. That is why one of the strongest warnings against apostasy in the new covenant is prefaced with this call: “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the

habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (Heb. 10:24–25).

We must impress upon our children the blessing and glory of the church by both our example and our teaching, for they will never thrive in Christ apart from vital attachment to Christ’s body in the local congregation. But while they certainly need the church, it is also the case that the church needs them. The fifth membership vow emphasizes the communal dimension of our faith when it asks, “Do you promise to participate faithfully in this church’s worship and service, to submit in the Lord to its government, and to heed its discipline, even in case you should be found delinquent in doctrine or life?” Again, this question is best broken up into multiple parts as we work through it with our children.

Participating in the Church

The vow begins by asking, “Do you promise to participate faithfully in this church’s worship and service?” There are no passive members of the church. The consumeristic view of church so prevalent today—one that leaves the work to a few trained professionals who exist to meet the wants and needs of the rest—cannot be harmonized with the Bible. Every member of Christ’s body has a vital role to play as they glorify God together (worship) and help one another grow in grace (service).

The word *church* literally refers to a called-out and called-together assembly. God calls sinners out of the world to assemble in His presence to exalt Him. Nothing is more fundamental to the church’s vocation than public worship. It is here that God’s people gather on God’s day to commune with Him and with one another through the reading and preaching of the Word (1 Tim. 4:13; 2 Tim. 4:2), the administration of the sacraments (Matt. 28:19; 1 Cor. 11:23–29), and the offering up of praise, prayer, and tithes (Eph. 5:19; 1 Tim. 2:1; 1 Cor. 16:2). In every element of worship, God’s people are to be actively engaged. Our children must understand that worship doesn’t merely happen in the singing to God, but that we worship as we hear God’s Word, receive God’s sacrament, and seek God’s face in prayer. One of the signs of a child’s readiness to profess faith is that they love public worship, engage in it, and even bemoan being providentially hindered from assembling with the saints on the Lord’s Day.

The church doesn't immediately disband when the worship service ends. This body of believers is a holy community wherein the various members give themselves to each other in love. It is the sanctifying power of the preached Word that brings this about (Eph. 4:7–16), leading them to be devoted to one another in intimate fellowship (Acts 2:42). Every member of the church has a responsibility to use their gifts and abilities to serve (1 Pet. 4:10), to open their homes in hospitality (Rom. 12:13), to support those in financial need (2 Cor. 8:1–7), and to spur one another on toward greater love for and conformity to Jesus Christ (Heb. 3:13; 10:24). While our younger children may still be learning what God-given gifts they have, and do not yet have homes of their own or a regular paycheck to tithe, their faith ought still to evidence itself in a selfless love and care toward others in the body and a desire for their spiritual and physical good.

Does your child understand his or her need of the church? Does she evidence a delight in the local congregation and a sadness when she is unable to gather with God's people? What signs are there of his active participation in public worship and using his gifts to serve the church? Does he or she demonstrate a heart of love and care for the particular members of the body—including not just fellow children, but also adults?

In Scripture

- Hebrews 10:24–25: “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”
- Acts 2:42: “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”
- Ephesians 4:11–13: “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.”
- Romans 12:3–6a: “For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have

many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them.”

In Catechism

- FC Q. 94: *How should you keep the Lord's Day?*
A. I should rest from my daily work and faithfully worship God.
- SC Q. 88: *What are the outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption?*
A. The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption, are his ordinances, especially the word, sacraments, and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for salvation.
- SC Q. 89: *How is the word made effectual to salvation?*
A. The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially the preaching, of the word, an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners, and of building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith, unto salvation.
- SC Q. 90: *How is the word to be read and heard, that it may become effectual to salvation?*
A. That the word may become effectual to salvation, we must attend thereunto with diligence, preparation and prayer; receive it with faith and love, lay it up in our hearts, and practice it in our lives.
- SC Q. 91: *How do the sacraments become effectual means of salvation?*
A. The sacraments become effectual means of salvation, not from any virtue in them, or in him that doth administer them; but only by the blessing of Christ, and the working of his Spirit in them that by faith receive them.

In Conversation

- Why do Christians need the church?

- What do we do as a church when we gather for worship? Which part of the service do you most enjoy, and why?
- When the pastor is preaching or praying during a worship service, what should we be doing?
- In what specific ways are Christians called to serve and bless each other in the church? Can you give examples of ways you have seen such service in our local church?
- Why should the Lord's Day be our favorite day of the week?

Submitting to the Church

The second part of the final membership vow asks, "Do you promise to submit in the Lord to this church's government and to heed its discipline, even in case you should be found delinquent in doctrine or life?"

One trait of Western individualism is an aversion to external authority. But the Scriptures teach that God has designed various authority structures in society for the common good. Human authority is so important to God that He even devotes one of the Ten Commandments to addressing it: "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you" (Exod. 20:12). Children are called to submit to the authority of their parents. But we don't outgrow submission when we become adults. Citizens of the state are called to submit to their civil leaders (Rom. 13:1), and so too members of the church are called to submit to their elders (1 Thess. 5:12–13; Heb. 13:17). Submission to godly church leaders is one way we show our submission to Christ, who governs His church through a plurality of leaders under His Word. This is what it means for us to be "Presbyterian," a term that derives from the Greek word for "elder." We believe that the chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ, leads, feeds, protects, and prospers His sheep through godly and gifted undershepherds who sacrificially and selflessly oversee and tend to the flock (1 Pet. 5:1–4; Acts 20:28). Healthy disciples gladly submit to the authority of the elders, recognizing it to be a demonstration of the life-giving authority of their Savior.

One of the blessings of the various authority structures in society is accountability. Could you imagine a family without the parental rod or a society without the magisterial sword? The

authority structure in the church likewise holds those within it accountable, as elders wield the keys of the kingdom to not only open the door of the church to the repentant and believing, but also to shut the door to those who persist in gross, unrepentant sin, rendering their profession of faith no longer credible (Matt. 18:15–20). The goal of such disciplinary action in the church is the repentance and restoration of the offending party and the peace and purity of the church (1 Cor. 5:1–13). No one makes a profession of faith expecting to become the offending party in need of such discipline, but the humble disciple recognizes his or her proneness to wander and is therefore thankful to have the accountability that comes from being under the authority of elders who lovingly watch over their souls.

Does your child respect and submit to authority in the home and in the church? Does he understand the role and responsibility that the elders play in the local congregation? Does she see the care and wisdom of Christ in church discipline and sense her own need for such accountability?

In Scripture

- Acts 14:23: “And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.”
- Titus 1:5–7a: “This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you—if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. For an overseer, as God’s steward, must be above reproach.”
- Acts 20:28: “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.”
- 1 Thessalonians 5:12–13: “We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.”

- Hebrews 13:17: “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

In Catechism

- FC Q. 96: *What does the fifth commandment teach you?*
A. To love and obey my parents and all others that God appoints over me.
- SC Q. 64: *What is required in the fifth commandment?*
A. The fifth commandment requireth the preserving the honor, and performing the duties, belonging to every one in their several places and relations, as superiors, inferiors or equals.
- SC Q. 65: *What is forbidden in the fifth commandment?*
A. The fifth commandment forbiddeth the neglecting of, or doing anything against, the honor and duty which belongeth to every one in their several places and relations.

In Conversation

- Do you know the elders of our church?
- What does God call elders to do in the church?
- How does God call us to relate to the elders of the church? Why?
- What is church discipline, and why do we need it?

Conclusion: What Are the Next Steps?

One of the most important rituals in nearly every society is the rite of passage. Our modern Western sensibilities are likely to be disturbed when we consider what is required of boys to be initiated into manhood in other cultures. Consider one of the oldest tribes in Brazil, the Sateré-Mawé people, who weave hundreds of bullet ants (named for the fact that their bites hurt as badly as gunshots) into a pair of gloves, with all their stingers pointing inward. They require the boy to wear these gloves for five minutes. It is said that the agony experienced during that time is greater than can be imagined. The venom enters the boy's bloodstream, causing him to hallucinate, shake violently, and experience temporary paralysis—symptoms that often last for days. If you want to be a man in this tribe, you have to endure this—not once, but twenty times over the course of a few months!

Or consider the tribe on Pentecost Island in Vanuatu, where boys, as young as seven years old, are required to construct a tower between 70 and 100 feet tall. They climb to the top, tie vines around their ankles, and jump off, with the goal of brushing their shoulders against the ground. If the vines are a bit too stretchy, or if the tower wobbles too much, the boy breaks his neck and dies.

Many more examples of disturbing and deadly initiation rites could be given, but they all share a common theme: the boy being initiated into manhood must prove himself, demonstrating that he is brave, strong, and worthy to be received into the community as a man.

How vastly different that is from the ecclesiastical society! What is it that brings a person into full communicant membership in the church? It is not their impressive strength, bravery, or righteousness. It is not their worthiness. Instead, it is their confession that they are not worthy in themselves to be a part of God's family, but that God has made them worthy through their union and communion with the strong, brave, and righteous Jesus Christ.

The membership vows which your child will take when he makes profession of faith strictly bind him or her to nothing but the basics of Christian discipleship. As you worked through those questions with your son or daughter, you likely were convicted of areas in your own life where you are falling short and certainly saw areas of weakness in your child. That is not a

reason to lose heart, but rather to cling to Christ all the tighter and call your child to do the same. When the elders look for a credible profession of faith, they are not looking for a perfect knowledge, faith, and life; they are looking for an adequate knowledge, a genuine faith, and sincere godliness. It would be rather ironic if Christ required perfect faith and godliness to be admitted to the Table, because the whole reason He has given this sacrament is to strengthen our faith (which implies it is weak), extend pardon to us (which implies sins on our part), and renew covenant with us (which implies our unfaithfulness). The Table is not for perfect disciples, but for sincere disciples who recognize their need of Christ and are ready and willing to live for Him by His amazing grace.

If, after working through this material, you doubt your child's ability to make a credible profession of faith—a believing confession of basic biblical and gospel truth that is not contradicted in life—continue to give yourself to diligently teaching your children in the context of the home and the local church. Pray earnestly and persistently for the Lord to bring them to a saving and sanctifying knowledge of Himself, so that they might genuinely embrace and own all the blessings and obligations of the covenant of grace through Jesus Christ.

If, however, after discussing the truths in the preceding pages at length, your child evidences a sincere faith wed to sincere godliness and a readiness to profess that faith publicly, then the following steps ought to be taken by your child:

1. Express the desire to an elder.

We recognize it can be intimidating for your child to approach one of the elders to initiate this discussion. We are not opposed to them being accompanied by a parent, but we want to see the child taking this step rather than the parent. As elders, we aim to build relationships with the children of the church so that they don't view us as scary or unapproachable. So when you believe your child is ready to profess faith and they are desirous to do so, they should discuss it with the pastor or their district elder. He or she can expect a warm question or two in response, such as, "Why do you want to make public profession of faith?" or "Why are you desirous to partake of the Lord's Supper?"

2. Participate in a Confessing Christ class.

In most cases, the child will be invited to participate in a class ordinarily taught by the pastor, titled *Confessing Christ*. (If it is deemed that the child is not ready to take this step, the elders will provide other steps for the parents to take with the child to become ready.) This class fulfills the directive of our *Book of Church Order*, which states: “In order to aid those who contemplate making public profession or reaffirmation of faith in Christ to understand the implication of this significant act and to perform it meaningfully, the pastor or someone approved by the session shall conduct classes in Christian doctrine and life, both for the covenant youth and for any others who may manifest an interest in the way of salvation” (DPW IV, A.2). Through this class, many of the same truths you have worked through with your children will be further solidified, along with more in-depth teaching on the nature of the sacraments. It serves the twofold purpose of giving the pastor an opportunity to gauge your child’s readiness to publicly profess faith while also preparing them to take this step.

3. Attend an interview with the elders.

When the class is completed, an interview will be scheduled with the elders. Again, our Book of Church Order requires: “In order for the session to assure itself so far as possible that the candidate makes a credible profession, it shall examine him to ascertain that he possesses the doctrinal knowledge requisite for saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, relies on the merits of Christ alone, and is determined by the grace of God to lead a Christian life” (DPW IV, A.3).

Parents are welcome to accompany their child for the interview if it would make the child feel less anxious. But we graciously ask that you allow your son or daughter to answer our questions without coaching them in the interview. We want to hear your child articulate his or her faith and get a window into their heart—not yours. We seek to make this interview as unintimidating as possible and tailor our questions to the age and comprehension level of the one we are interviewing. We are not looking for exact catechism quotations (though we encourage catechism memorization); rather, we want to hear them express their convictions in their own words, even if simply. Your child can expect to be asked a sampling of the conversation questions found in chapters 6–10 of *Prepared to Partake*. Assuming you have thoroughly discussed these

things with them, there won't be any surprises. All we are looking for is evidence of a clear understanding of the basics of the Christian faith, a sincere receiving and resting upon Christ alone for salvation, an evident desire to live for Him together with other believers in the church, and the understanding and ability to partake of the Lord's Supper in a worthy manner.

4. Publicly profess their faith during a Sunday worship service.

Once the session approves your child to make profession of faith following the interview, a date will be set for him or her to stand before the congregation to do so. Your son or daughter will publicly take the five membership vows, followed by a brief exhortation from the pastor and a prayer. Then the elders will welcome them into full communicant membership at Cornerstone.

Only the Beginning

Profession of faith is a momentous occasion and one worth celebrating. But it is important for us as parents to remember that it is only the beginning of a lifetime of faithfully confessing and following Jesus together with the church. Some parents breathe a sigh of relief when their children take this step, as if their job as parents is done and their children have "arrived." Don't give in to that mentality! From that point forward, your aim must be to deepen and expand the faith in and devotion to Christ your child has confessed—and that is the work of a lifetime. The words of the apostle must be yours toward your son or daughter: "But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:14–15).