

**THE CASE FOR
COVENANT COMMUNION**

GREGG STRAWBRIDGE, EDITOR

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

WHY ARE WE PUBLISHING THIS BOOK?

GIVEN THE EVENTS OF RECENT YEARS, some will probably roll their eyes and heave a great sigh when they see this book. "Honey! Look what Auburn Avenue is up to now! Trying to start *more* trouble!" This reaction is understandable, and for that reason we want to make a few things plain before you begin to read.

This book presents arguments in favor of a practice which our denomination (the Presbyterian Church in America) and other conservative denominations (the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, for example) do not allow—paedocommunion (or more exactly, the practice of allowing baptized children to participate in the Lord's Supper without first requiring a personal profession of faith). One might think that by publishing a book like this we are seeking to encourage rebellion against our particular branches of Christ's church. Nothing could be further from the truth.

All of the contributors to this book have been allowed to teach and preach on this topic by their respective presbyteries. Those who are members of denominations that disallow the practice of covenant communion are living in submission to the judgment of their respective denominations, and *none* is practicing convictions which are contrary to the constitutions of the churches of which they are members (and that includes all of us here at Auburn Avenue). There is not the least desire to cause schism over this issue. Truth is, we all have dear friends who disagree with us on this subject, and we are not even interested in *fighting* over this—godly debate is all we can and will encourage.

None of the contributors is interested in overthrowing the theological progress made during the Protestant Reformation and no one has any desire to provoke sinful discontent among those who are members of churches where covenant communion is not practiced. Indeed, numerous times we have counseled members of churches which do not allow the practice advocated here to be patient, gracious, and, above all, *not* to cause division or unrighteous strife over this issue. We have no desire to give more reasons for division, nor are we by this seeking to draw any lines in the sand.

We are not advocating *revolution* but we do earnestly desire *reformation*.

One of the most attractive principles of the Reformed faith is that which sets before the church the goal of continually being reformed according to the Scriptures. The Reformed understand that the church is a

dynamic organism that grows throughout history into maturity and full conformity to its Savior. This principle recognizes that there are depths to the Word of God that neither we nor our fathers have yet fully plumbed. We still have a long way to go in terms of grasping the truth that God has revealed and understanding its implications for us individually and corporately.

Far from despising the progress made in the past, we honor it and rejoice in it. But the best way to honor theological progress is to use it as a foundation for future growth, rather than making it into a shrine before which we bow. The Holy Spirit leads the church into an understanding of the truth little by little, step by step, gradually over time. The Reformed have always recognized this and thus have been able to honor the tradition of the church without falling into the error of viewing it either as infallible or final and complete. Dr. John Murray reminds us of this truth:

There is the progressive understanding of the faith delivered to the saints. There is in the church the ceaseless activity of the Holy Spirit so that the church organically and corporately increases in knowledge unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ . . . the Westminster Confession . . . is the epitome of the most mature thought to which the church of Christ had been led up to the year 1646. But are we to suppose that this progression ceased with that date? To ask the question is to answer it. An affirmative is to impugn the continued grace of which the Westminster Confession is itself an example at the time of its writing. There is more light to break forth from the living and abiding Word of God. ("The Theology of the Westminster Confession of Faith," *Collected Writings*, 4:242)

As wonderful as our creeds and confessions of the past are (and we truly believe they are), we believe there is still much room for growth in both our understanding and practice. The topic discussed within these pages is one of the areas that needs to be studied carefully.

Theology is not to be done apart from the church but in communion with it. It is a *public* rather than a private project. The Spirit leads *the church* into an understanding of the truth and not simply individual Christians here and there. It is all too easy to be misled by our own pride and confidence when it comes to interpreting God's Word, and we want to use every safeguard at our disposal in order to avoid this. This is the spirit in which this project was undertaken.

It is our opinion that the Reformed church of our day is in error at this point, but we are not so foolish as to believe this actually is the case just because we *think* it is. Therefore, these essays are presented to the church

for its study, critique, and discussion. They are not the last word in any sense. Indeed, far from that, we believe that the debate has barely begun. Our prayer is that the articles contained in this book will provoke more study of God's Word and that we will all be led into a more clear understanding of the truth God has revealed. If so, whatever the outcome, that will be reason enough to give earnest praise to God.

Steve Wilkins
Athanasius Press
Lent, 2006

FOREWORD

THIS BOOK CONTAINS A NUMBER OF arguments in favor of paedocommunion, and they are competently marshaled and ably argued by a number of godly men. My purpose here is not to try to anticipate those arguments, but rather to try to stir in you, the reader, a desire to hope that it might all be true. The Bereans were more noble than the Jews in Thessalonica, as we have all heard many times (Acts 17:11). But there are two reasons given for that nobility. One, of course, was that they searched the Scriptures to see if the word brought by the apostles was true. We are the heirs of the magisterial Reformers, and so we want to ground everything we believe and do in the absolutes of God's Word. But the second reason given by Luke for their nobility is that they received the Word with great eagerness. This is a good model for us. We ought not to be gullible, believing whatever happens to strike our fancy. But neither are we to be cranky, refusing to receive any new blessing from the Scriptures.

We are to search the Scriptures to verify what we are being taught. And if the teaching glorifies and exalts the kindness and greatness of God, demonstrates the abundance of His grace, and in every other respect appears too good to be true, we should receive it with shrewd eagerness. This kind of eagerness is not blind—we are still to double-check it all against the text. But we do so with a prayer: “Oh, dear Lord, how wonderful this would be . . .”

And I want to mention one reason why these arguments, if scripturally persuasive, would be wonderful news indeed. I am a minister of a church which practices weekly communion. We follow the covenant renewal pattern in worship, which means (among other things) that the service culminates each week in our observance of the Supper. In addition to the sermon, I deliver a short homily and exhortation in the administration of the Supper. That exhortation is to the point and just takes a few minutes. But the central theme I have sought to emphasize is that the Lord is pleased with His people, delights over them with singing, rejoices to commune with them in the Eucharistic celebration. I have found, as a result of exhorting the saints this way, that many of them have had trouble adjusting to it. They have been taught a completely different view of the Supper.

They think of the Supper as a time of introspection and self-examination. It is time to confess sins and to try to make things right. In some cases, the Supper turns into a time of morbid or pathological introspection, and it is easy for believers to think that they have the right

(or even obligation) to shrink back from the table if they had a week that was spiritually sub-par. This kind of conviction is deeply ingrained in devout Christians, and I have been struck at the kinds of comments I have received about our “different” approach to the Supper.

Instead of curling up into an introspective cocoon, the saints should be learning to discern that the Lord’s Supper is a corporate event, not an individual event. Instead of dimming the lights and bowing their heads and closing their eyes, the believers should be looking around the sanctuary, loving and discerning the body. Instead of groveling in confession, the body of Christ should be seated together with Christ in the central meal of the *kingdom*. This is the place where the friends of God rule.

This is not to diminish the importance of confession of sin. It is an important part of Christian worship. But you wipe your feet at the door when you first come in. Confession of sin corresponds to the guilt offering of the Old Testament. The center of the worship service corresponds to the ascension offering, the offering of entire consecration. And the culmination of the service lines up with the peace offering of the Old Testament, where the worshipper sits down and shares a meal with his God. In the Old Testament, this is the order the sacrifices come in—guilt offering, ascension offering, and peace offering. Those who want to pursue this further should look to Jeff Meyers’ fine book on the subject, *The Lord’s Service*.

But why mention all this here? Too many Christians have the Lord’s Supper in the right *place* in the worship service, but through introspection they have drastically altered the *nature* of the Supper. If we are worshipping the triune God rightly, the culmination of worship is joy, and rule, and strength, and joy. When we break bread together, we do so in gladness and simplicity of heart. But let us repeat the question. Why mention all this here in the foreword to a book on paedocommunion?

Most Christian adults learned about the Supper *when they were children*, whether they were allowed to partake of it or not. And in the modern Reformed tradition, many were simply observers of the Supper, not partakers of the Supper. They were excluded from the *koinōnia*, and this has affected their view of the Supper—and does so for many years after they come to the table. If the Supper is my reward for achieving *something*—maturity, good catechism answers, a successful interview with the session, or a certain height—then it is terribly easy to think of it in those same terms ever after. Christians come to the table with the default assumption that they are “not worthy.” Well, of course we are not worthy—that is the whole *point*. But we should have dealt with all that at the beginning of the service in the confession and first psalm. Here, although we are not worthy of the *honor*, we have been promoted to rule

together with Christ. It is inadequate to say that we are not worthy of the crumbs under the Lord's table. This is quite true, but it is also not what happened to us. The prodigal son was not worthy of the servants' food that he asked for when he returned to his father in repentance. He was not worthy of that, had that been offered. But he was offered far more than that. He wasn't worthy of the robe, either, or the fatted calf, or the four-piece jazz band his father hired. He wasn't worthy of any of the honor he received, which does not alter the fact that he was, in fact, receiving honor. The same is true of us—we are receiving an unspeakable honor in the Supper, which we should never take for granted. But when you are invited to dine with royalty, it is not appropriate to crawl to your seat.

This is an easy pattern for us to slip into, and it is easy precisely because we learned it as children. What is being urged here is a fundamentally different orientation toward the table. The arguments here ought not to be taken as urging churches to start the process of morbid introspection earlier. We are not arguing that eight-year-olds should be afflicting their souls in the Supper instead of waiting until they are sixteen. Rather, we want to teach our children to rejoice in the goodness and kindness and grace of our God. We want them to experience it all as sheer, unmitigated *grace*. This is a Eucharistic meal, a meal of thanksgiving. This cannot be done by keeping the children back from it because they have not yet "passed a test." This does not teach the rudiments of grace, but rather, as I can testify as a pastor, quite the opposite.

A few years ago, when one of my grandsons first came to the table (he was one year old), he was beside himself. His parents had taught him a basic catechism with signs because he could not really talk. He answered the question "Are you baptized?" by patting his own head. I was administering the Supper, and he was sitting in the front row with his parents and grandmother. When he got his bread, he held it up to show me. Now all this could be dismissed simply as a grandkid doing a cute thing, not really understanding it. But he also turned and patted his mother's head and his grandmother's head. *We are all baptized*. He was discerning the body. To the extent he understood the Supper, he was discerning the body. To the extent that he did not understand the Supper (as the rest of us do not either), he was learning, just as we are. We speak English to our children before they know English, and it is not a fruitless waste of time. That is how they become native speakers. In the same way, we are "speaking grace" to our children by including them in the Supper. And what impact does it have to speak grace to children so early? We do it so they might become native speakers of that same grace.

Another time a granddaughter (around two) saw the elders ap-

proaching and cried out, “Bread guys! Bread guys!” Now what would it be like to grow up in this kind of exuberance? What would it be like to never have to unlearn the long hard lessons of exclusion from the *koinōnia* for a time? Wouldn’t it be wonderful if it were true? God invites the psalmist, “Open your mouth, and I will fill it.” May this one day be the prayer of all God’s children. May all our little ones be given the privilege of looking forward in gladness and simplicity to the bread guys.

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INTRODUCTION

THE BATTLE IS OVER, AND IN THE GREAT dining hall the feast is prepared. It is grand. The linens adorn a table in settings of gold and silver. The wine is the finest vintage. All of the king's house is present. The nobility, the generals, and the heirs await the toast. The king is seated at the head of the table, but has a troubled look.

"Is there anyone left in the enemy's house?" asks the king.
"No, my lord, the enemy has been vanquished," answers a general.
"But wait, there is one man left," he remembers, "but he is no threat to you, my lord."
"Where is he? What is his name?" insists the king.
"We will get him, sir. My men will . . ."
"No," says the king. "I want him alive. What is his name?"
"His name is Mephibosheth."

No doubt you know of the story of lame Mephibosheth (2 Sam. 9:1–13). He was the son of Saul's son, Jonathan. David's question was, "Is there still anyone who is left of the house of Saul, that I may show him kindness for Jonathan's sake?" (2 Sam. 9:1). The last verse of the story reminds us that "Mephibosheth dwelt in Jerusalem, for he ate continually at the king's table. And he was lame in both his feet" (2 Sam. 9:13).

All who find themselves at the table of the Lord are like Mephibosheth. We are lame. Sometimes we pretend that we stand up on our own two feet and make a place at the table for ourselves. But, in truth, we must be carried there if we are to be seated. And Jesus does carry us. He lifts us from our deformity and seats us with Him, though we are unworthy.

It is in light of this grace of our Lord Jesus that I invite you to see the Lord's table as communion with a King who seats us as a congregation of lame Mephibosheths. I believe this leads us to permit all baptized children as qualified for the table by covenant membership. This is what is called paedocommunion.

Our Baptist brethren object to the whole package. Not only to children at communion, but bringing children to the water of baptism. Growing up as a Baptist, I was frequently reminded of the need for conversion testimonies of salvation. I heard an ex-con drug addict standing in the waters of baptism, explaining how she was saved. It is powerful to hear and see dramatic changes in a person's life. How could the baptism of a little child compare to this?

The last baby that I baptized was little Addelynn. As an infant, she

had to be carried to the baptismal font by her father, Jonathan. After covenant vows, I took her into my arms and baptized her in the Triune name. All the while she was helpless to aid or resist. When she was baptized she didn't "decide to follow the Lord in believer's baptism" and stand in the water and tell those enthusiastically looking on that, "Well, I used to be . . . but now I'm saved." Of what does the baptism of this helpless, unreasoning, decisionless, born-in-sin child testify?

I hope you can see that little Addelynn, though in full need of grace, was utterly unable to even ask for it or make the smallest contribution to get it. According to the Reformed faith, faith is a response to the prior grace of God. Perhaps you can see that infant baptism paints a vivid and accurate picture of a covenant salvation which is by grace alone. An infant baptism shows that covenant children are lame and must be brought to the font. The inability that children can only illustrate is what all adult converts should confess.

This truth is no less marvelous with children at the table. God's provision of nurture, sustenance, and life is not by our doing. We can't earn it or buy it. Our best response is an ever-deepening gratitude ("thanksgiving," or Eucharist). It is to be a thanksgiving that flows out into the rest of life, to all the lesser tables of the great table.

When children partake, it is a fitting picture of the reality of salvation. Certainly, it is more beautiful than when adults think they've got it all figured out and demand a seat. Children at the table show a shade of the color of grace which reminds us that we are like Mephibosheth. This glimmer of grace is not visible and maybe *not even there* when we, as the "wise," think we have our systematic t's crossed and i's dotted; when we come in a spirit of pride, quite confident of the proper mode of Christ's presence, dividing asunder joints and marrow of Zwingli, Luther, Calvin and the Fourth Lateran Council—when the main point of the table is what it is not! "I thank Thee, Lord, that I am not like the papists, nor the Zwinglians, nor the Lutherans . . ."

Regardless of your view of the subject of this book, knowing that we are undeserving of a seat at the table of the King, then I trust that you will find each essay in this book useful, thoughtful, and—I hope—compelling. The writers have provided articulate biblical, theological, historical, and pastoral reasons for permitting children at the table.

Gregg Strawbridge
Epiphany 2006

1

A PRESBYTERIAN DEFENSE OF PAEDOCOMMUNION

ROBERT S. RAYBURN

I AM A SON OF THE COVENANT.¹ I GREW UP the loyal son of a Reformed and Presbyterian home. I was taught the catechism as a boy and I believed it. As I came into young adulthood I had occasion to put some of that teaching to the test. I satisfied my mind, for example, that the doctrine of divine sovereignty, which I had been taught as a boy, was not only the unequivocal teaching of Holy Scripture, but also the necessary implication of the Bible's theology, its doctrine of God. Through my college and seminary years I examined for myself and settled my mind concerning some other doctrines that lie near the heart of that theological system that we have inherited from the magisterial reformers, the British and Dutch

1. Editor's note: This chapter originally appeared as the text to a debate on paedocommunion between Dr. Rayburn and Dr. Kenneth Gentry, as part of the Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary's Spring Theology Conference in 2004 and was published in *The Covenant: God's Voluntary Condescension* (Taylors, SC: Presbyterian Press, 2005). Permission for use here was graciously granted by the author and the seminary. The reader is encouraged to read Dr. Gentry's presentation in the above text, as well as listen to the recorded debate (available at WordMp3.com).

Puritans, and the American Presbyterians. I continue to believe that the unassailable strength of that theology and the way of life derived from it is its robust biblicism, its determination neither to fall short of nor go beyond the plain-speaking of the Word of God.

When I was ordained to the Presbyterian ministry, I took no exceptions to the Westminster Standards. I was well into my ministry when, for the first time, I was presented with an argument that seemed to me, on its face, to cast doubt on the biblical foundation of a part of my faith and life as a Reformed Christian. It was, to be sure, not a major part of the theological system I had been taught in home, in church, and in seminary. Indeed, I have no recollection of the question ever coming up in a seminary class, though it may have incidentally. No statement of this particular doctrine or its related practice is found in any of the great Reformed confessions, even in the most elaborate of them, and in the case of our Presbyterian standards the assertion amounts to no more than fourteen words at the tail end of a long answer to a question of the Larger Catechism. It was, however, the well-nigh universal assumption of our church and lay beneath a universal practice. It has to do with how the church understands the nature of the church membership of covenant children. This, in turn, has significant implications for our understanding of the way God takes with the children of the covenant and so bears on the practice of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Reformed churches have, since the Reformation, excluded baptized covenant children from participation in the Lord's Supper *until* they are of an age at which they are thought capable of professing their own faith in Jesus Christ. But now that practice and the understanding that lay beneath it was being called into question.

When I first began to doubt this practice, I turned to our Reformed authorities on the assumption that I would find what I had always found before: a careful and learned presentation of the biblical data and a persuasive argument that the Bible teaches what we had always believed and practiced. It is an understatement to say that I was disappointed by what I found. In many works of Reformed systematic theology, even in many works on the Lord's Supper and its practice, there was no mention of, much less any serious consideration of, the universal practice of excluding covenant children from the covenant meal. In the rare instances in which an argument was offered in support of our practice, it was perfunctory and utterly incapable of resisting the attack that was now being mounted against our theory and our practice. The new thinking, in fact, had all the power and persuasiveness I had so long associated with theological constructions of the Reformed type, namely, that it took seriously the actual statements of the Bible and constructed from them a

2

PRESBYTERIAN, EXAMINE THYSELF: RESTORING CHILDREN TO THE TABLE

JEFFREY J. MEYERS

*The bread which we break, is it not a communion in the body of Christ?
Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we
all partake of one bread. 1 Corinthians 10:16b-17*

CONFESSIONAL PRESBYTERIAN THEOLOGIANS and pastors traditionally cite 1 Corinthians 11:28 as *the* argument against those who want to restore our young covenant children to the Lord's table: "A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup" (NIV). They suppose that this text demands a certain level of intellectual competence as well as a capacity to engage in mature, self-conscious introspection, both of which, we are told, small children, especially infants, do not possess. Therefore, since children are not able to "examine themselves" before partaking, they cannot be allowed access to the Lord's table. If they are permitted to commune too soon, and they don't understand what is going on in the sacrament, they will "eat and drink judgment upon themselves" (1 Cor. 11:29). Although this interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11:28 seems to have attained the status of infallible tradition in Protestantism, there are good reasons to question this understanding of 1 Corinthians 11 and the practice of excluding the weakest members of the body of Christ from

partaking of the Lord's family Supper.

John Calvin's argument against communing young children stands or falls with this argument:

[The Lord] does not . . . hold forth the Supper for all to partake of, but only for those who are capable of discerning the body and blood of the Lord, of examining their own conscience, of proclaiming the Lord's death, and of considering its power. Do we wish anything plainer than the apostle's teaching when he exhorts each man to prove and search himself, then to eat of this bread and drink of this cup? A self-examination, therefore ought to come first, and it is vain to expect this of infants . . . Why should we offer poison instead of life-giving food to our tender children? (*Institutes*, 4.16.30)

This line of reasoning has been repeated over and over again in churches that are part of the Reformation tradition. Sometimes it appears to be taken for granted as "common sense" in modern conservative Presbyterian circles. But does 1 Corinthians 11:28 really require the kind of self-examination that Calvin and Presbyterians have traditionally thought? To whom does Paul address this admonition? What does the verb "examine" mean in the context of 1 Corinthians 11? Does it actually require "mature faith" and an ability to perform internal soul-searching and deep personal introspection before one can be judged worthy of participation at the Lord's table? I am convinced that this text has been made to serve a function in traditional discussions about the admission requirements for Holy Communion that goes well beyond Paul's solution for the problem in the Corinthian church's practice of the Supper. More ominously, I am convinced that this text, properly understood, actually stands *against* the traditional Presbyterian practice of excluding young children from the table. Those who fail to commune the youngest, weakest members of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:14–26) are themselves not "judging the body" (that is, *the church* as the communal body of Christ) and are therefore eating the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner. If this is true, then traditional Presbyterian theologians and pastors need to examine themselves if they are going to avoid eating and drinking judgment on themselves (1 Cor. 11:29).

EACH PERSON MUST PROVE HIMSELF

Let us begin with the command in 1 Corinthians 11:28. The Greek verb Paul uses here is *dokimazō*, which means "to prove, approve, or test." To bring out the meaning of this word in context, it may be best to translate 1 Corinthians 11:28 as follows: "Let a man prove himself and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup." This is how *dokimazō* is normally used in Paul's

3

THE KINGDOM OF GOD AND CHILDREN AT THE TABLE

TIM GALLANT

FOR GENERATIONS, THE REFORMED TRADITION has barred children from the Lord's table until such time as they can make a mature profession of faith. While what precisely constitutes a "mature profession" has been variously construed, the general agreement has been that the table is not offered on the basis of baptism, and ought to follow a quite knowledgeable, clearly-articulated affirmation of faith.

Given this history, those who advocate the communing of children from very young ages face the burden of proof for setting forth an alternative.¹ While bypassing many sound arguments for paedocommunion such as the participation of children in the old covenant meals,² I wish to focus upon the

1. This burden of proof, however, ought to be balanced by the fact that children *were* communed for most of Church history. It will not do to suppose that only post-Reformation history carries any authority in terms of precedent. The overwhelming evidence for paedocommunion from approximately the third through twelfth centuries is an imposing record that does not deserve to be dismissed lightly.

2. For some of this evidence, see *Feed My Lambs*. For another helpful angle, see also C. John Collins, "The Eucharist As Christian Sacrifice: How Patristic Authors Can Help Us Read the Bible," *Westminster Theological Journal* 66, (2004): 1–23. Collins argues that the early Church understood the Lord's Supper as a peace offering,

kingdom of God and how the communion table relates to it. From there we will broach the question of children. How do they stand in relation to the kingdom? Do they belong at the table?

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

The terminology of “the kingdom of God” or “the kingdom of heaven” is frequently misunderstood. Often, it has come to function as another way of speaking of “heaven.” “Entering the kingdom of heaven” is taken to mean either “going to heaven, where God and the angels are,” or “getting saved.” In the case of the latter, salvation is generally seen as something timeless: just as Abraham or Moses or David got saved, so it is with us—each of us “enters the kingdom of heaven.” This, however, is not in accordance with the biblical usage of the term.

THE NEWNESS OF THE KINGDOM

In terms of Scripture, the kingdom finds its advent with the ministry of Jesus. The New Testament is the record of the coming of the kingdom of God. John announced it as “at hand.” As His ministry advanced, Jesus moved from echoing that same announcement of nearness among His hearers, to stating that it had indeed become present.³ It had become something available to enter into.⁴

But what is the kingdom? Kingdom implies *rule*; how can we speak of the *arrival* of the rule of God, who reigns eternally? While Scripture frequently speaks of God’s sovereign rule of all things—a comprehensive ordering of every detail from the least to the greatest (“our God is in heaven; whatever He pleases, He does,” Ps. 115:3)—yet the idea of the kingdom of God is distinct from this general truth. It has to do with the rule of God through His Messiah, a rule which would bring blessing to the people of God and alter the order of things in the world. The eschatological cast of the enthronement psalms, for example, anticipated a time when Yahweh would come to judge the earth with righteousness and truth (see, e.g., Psalm 96:13 in context). The prophecies of Isaiah, in turn, suggest that such expectation is tied to the time of the Servant, whose arrival will occasion the spreading of good news by eager messengers declaring the triumph of God.⁵

At least in the Gospels, the term “kingdom of heaven,” then, refers nei-

noting that children participated in these during the old covenant period. (Note also that the Passover was actually a specific instance of the peace offering.)

3. Compare Matthew 3:2 and 4:17 with Matthew 12:28 and Luke 17:21.

4. Matthew 23:13.

5. See, e.g., Isaiah 40:9.

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CHILDREN AND THE RELIGIOUS MEALS OF THE OLD CREATION

JAMES B. JORDAN

THE PURPOSE OF THIS ESSAY IS TO SURVEY and discuss what the Hebrew Scriptures (the “Old Testament”) say about the place of children in religious meals. The relevance of such a study is that it provides the background for the final portion of the Scriptures (the “New Testament”). It tells us what the people addressed by the New Testament writings—which are “to the Jew first”—had been thinking and doing for the previous 1400 or so years.

To get at this question, we have to consider what the various religious meals were, and what was the condition for being present at them. By “religious meals,” I mean meals that have some kind of sacral quality that makes them different from common daily meals. These include covenant making and covenant renewing ceremonies, religious feasts of a more general type, meals linked to the Tabernacle and Temple rites, and occasions when God provides food or drink in an exceptional manner (as with manna and water from the rock). (I have avoided the word “sacrament” and have put it in quotation marks where I have employed it, because the term carries a lot of freight, and differing freight in various traditions.)

Before we begin, however, a few general observations are in order.

The first is that every single passage in the entire Bible that mentions or discusses children speaks of them as included in whatever religious event is under consideration. Jesus says to let the children come to Him. Paul addresses children in his letters. Moses tells Pharaoh that the children must accompany Israel to the great feast God is calling them to. Moses, in Deuteronomy, commands that children be allowed at the feasts. Search how you will, you will find no passage anywhere that hints at the exclusion of children from any religious event or meal.

Second, there is no passage anywhere in the Bible that commands, hints, or shows that children need to go through some *ritual* before they are included at any religious meal. There is neither “bar mitzvah” nor “confirmation” in the Bible.¹

Third, there is no passage anywhere in the Bible that commands, hints, or shows that children need to be *catechized or instructed* in order to make them eligible for any religious meal. Instruction took place at the meal, not before it.

Fourth, there is no passage anywhere in the Bible that commands, hints or shows that children need to make some kind of *declaration or decision* in order to make them eligible for any religious meal.

Fifth, there is no passage anywhere in the Bible that commands, hints, or shows that children need to be of a certain age in order to be eligible for any religious meal. And we should note that the Bible is quite specific in Numbers that a man must be twenty to be enrolled in the muster of Israel’s army, that a Levite must be twenty-five to start assisting the other Levites and thirty to begin full service, from which he retires at fifty (Num. 1:3; 4:3; 8:24–26). Also, Leviticus 27 provides a list of ages for both men and women by which they were to be valued if given to the sanctuary. If God had wanted to provide an age for children to come to Passover or anything else, He could easily have done so.²

1. Jesus’ appearance in the Temple at age twelve is sometimes linked with the bar mitzvah rituals of later Judaism. No such ritual custom existed in Jesus’ day, however, and nothing in the text hints that this was the first time Jesus had ever been to Jerusalem to a feast. As *The Encyclopedia of Judaism* states, “There is no evidence of a bar mitzvah ceremony prior to 1400” (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 102. Moreover, Jewish children participate in Passover long before bar mitzvah! The writings of the rabbis give strong indication that children participated in the Passover meal at the time of Christ. See Christian L. Keidel, “Is The Lord’s Supper for Children?” *Westminster Theological Journal* 37, no. 3 (1975): 314f, and Tim Gallant, *Feed My Lambs: Why the Lord’s table Should Be Restored to Covenant Children* (Grande Prairie, AB: Pactum Reformanda Pub., 2002), 56ff.

2. It is sometimes asserted on the basis of 1 Corinthians 11:28 that a child must

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CHRIST'S WAY-BREAD FOR A CHILD

RAY R. SUTTON

But we call it lembas or waybread, and it is more strengthening than any food made by Men," . . . "All the same, we bid you spare the food," they said. "Eat a little at a time, and only at need. For these things are given to serve you when all else fails. The cakes will keep sweet for many, many days, if they are unbroken and left in their leaf-wrappings, as we have brought them. One will keep a traveller on his feet for a day of long labour, even if he be one of the tall Men of the Minas Tirith.¹

J. R. R. TOLKIEN'S *LORD OF THE RINGS TRILOGY* is now legendary. In the first book of the series, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, there is a powerful scene in which the real heroes of the story, little people called Hobbits, are presented with way-bread for their long journey. This mysterious food is unique because it only takes a little to provide much. It is small yet it is large in effect. It can feed the largest of people and therefore, by implication, the smallest, lowliest of creatures—such as the Hobbits—for a long, long time.

J. R. R. Tolkien was a devout Christian. Christian theology and imagery

1. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), 360–61.

abound throughout his classic story.² Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, and other intellectual members of that distinguished group, the Inklings, met in a pub in Oxford every Tuesday for many years to discuss their writings that became a form of Christian apologetics. They discovered fantasy literature as a way to slip up on the academic community with the Christian message. They could say the most profound Christian realities under the imagery of other, science fiction-like worlds. For C. S. Lewis it was the world of Narnia. For Tolkien it was the realm of the Shire and the Hobbits. These imaginary realms were all used to convey a Christian world and life view.

In regard to way-bread, for example, the amazing food is no doubt a symbol of the sacrament of Holy Communion. In the New Testament, pieces of bread broken in Holy Communion are the crumbs from the table of God. Jesus graphically communicated this sacramental reality in His meeting with a woman pleading for the healing of her child. He told her, "It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs" (Matt. 15:25). Her response was simply, "Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table" (v. 27). The Son of God commended her for her "great faith" (v. 28).

The woman in essence was arguing that a little bit of God's blessing goes a long way. All she needed was a small portion of what He offered. In the final analysis, a piece of what the Lord gives is all one needs, for a part actually forms the whole. This principle carried over to the sacramental reality of the Lord's Supper in which the church is given crumbs from the Lord's table, a small portion of bread and wine representing the entire reality. One of the most famous prayers in the ancient Eucharistic liturgies of the church incorporates this teaching: "We do not presume to come to this Thy table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness but in Thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under Thy table. . . ."³

Pieces of bread are broken that represent the Lord Jesus Christ in some mysterious way. Yet those little pieces of bread and sip of wine are like the way-bread for the Hobbits. It is enough for big people, and even other small ones. Could it even be argued that *children* need the way-bread of Christ for the adult journey of life?

CHILDREN COMING TO JESUS . . . OH MY!

Once upon a time, children were prevented from coming to Christ. As a matter of fact, one of the most shocking scenes in the New Testament

2. Norman F. Cantor, *Inventing the Middle Ages* (New York: Quill William Morrow, 1991), 205–33.

3. The 1928 edition of the *Book of Common Prayer*, 82.

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GOD OF MY YOUTH: INFANT FAITH IN THE PSALTER

RICH LUSK

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Our children are a gift from God, which means parenting is a form of stewardship. As John Calvin emphasized, every child is a special blessing from God and every birth is a divine visitation. Parents are given a tremendous task: they are to take these little bundles of blessing and help them grow to Christian maturity. But while virtually all Christian parents share a common goal for their children (Christ-like character), not all agree on the starting point or how to arrive at the desired destination. The Spiritual nurture and formation of our children are weighty, difficult issues. One key question revolves around the nature of the child's relationship with God even from the womb. More specifically, this is the question of *fides infantum*, or infant faith.

The question of whether or not infants belonging to believing parents can have faith has been a troubling one in the history of the church. On the one hand, if we deny that they can have faith, we must either say that these children are lost if they die in infancy or that their salvation is an exception to the great Reformation principle of *sola fide*. (A further option is tendered by some who simply deny original sin. Infants are not yet sinners so they

cannot be condemned. Of course, one wonders why they are subject to the curse of death at all if they are innocent!) On the other hand, if we affirm the possibility of infant faith, we have the difficult task of explaining how persons who lack intellectual and verbal abilities can enter into personal, trusting relationships with others. Is infant faith theologically credible and psychologically plausible?

Some have adamantly denied the possibility of infant faith. Certainly this has been true of the Anabaptist and Baptist traditions, but it has also been the case with many Reformed theologians as well. Others have vigorously affirmed infant faith, pointing to infants as the best illustrations of gospel grace. Apart from intellectual and rational abilities, the Spirit is able to regenerate and sanctify infants so that they have a kind of “baby faith.” This view was advocated by Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin, and Zacharias Ursinus among others.¹ They all connected infant

1. For example, Zwingli insisted that children of believers be regarded as elect and as believers themselves. “All of those infants who are within the elect, who die, are elect. And this is my reason, because when I find no unfaith in any one I have no reason to condemn him; contrariwise, since I have the indubitable word of promise: they shall come and sit down with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, I shall be impious if I eject them from the company of the people of God. . . . What, then, of Esau if he had died as an infant? Would your judgment place him among the elect? Yes. Then does election remain sure? It does. And rejection remains also. But listen. If Esau had died an infant he would doubtless have been elect. For if he had died there would have been the seal of election, for the Lord would not have rejected him eternally. But since he lived and was of the non-elect, he so lived that we see in the fruit of his unfaith that he was rejected by the Lord.” Quoted in Peter Lillback, *The Binding of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), 105. Ursinus argues that infants believe “after their manner, or according to the condition of their age.” Since the Holy Spirit works in them “regeneration, good inclinations, new desires, and such other things as are necessary for their salvation,” they have everything required as a condition of receiving baptism. See *Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. by G. W. Williard (no publication data, 1851), 369–70. Lutherans and Anglicans have done the most to preserve the early Protestant teaching on infant faith. For example, Lutheran Charles P. Krauth offers a helpful and comprehensive defense of receptive faith in infants in *The Conservative Reformation and its Problems* (Philadelphia: The United Lutheran Publication House, 1913), 578–84. See also Anglican Colin Buchanan’s excellent *A Case for Infant Baptism* (Bramcote, Nottingham: Grove Books, 1990) and Buchanan’s dialogue with David Pawson in *Infant Baptism Under Cross Examination* (Bramcote, Nottingham: Grove Books, 1974 and 1976). British Presbyterian missionary Lesslie Newbigin argued that the Church’s practice of infant baptism serves as a “reminder” that “the work of God the Holy Spirit in recreating us as children of God begins before we have any

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SACRAMENTAL HERMENEUTICS AND THE CEREMONIES OF ISRAEL

PETER J. LEITHART

SIMPLY PUT, THE MOST COMMON REFORMED argument for infant baptism is this: (male) children were included in Israel in the Old Testament; Israel and the church are the same people, bearers of the same promise; therefore, just as (male) children were marked for inclusion by circumcision in the old covenant, so children should be marked for inclusion by baptism in the new covenant. The argument for the inclusion of young children in the Lord's Supper has the same structure: children ate with their parents at the feasts of Israel;¹ Israel and the church are the same people; therefore, children should participate in the Christian feast.

1. For the purposes of this essay, I take it as proven that children participated in the feasts of Israel. In addition to other resources, especially Tim Gallant's *Feed My Lambs: Why the Lord's Supper Should Be Restored to Covenant Children* (Pactum Reformanda, 2002), I point the reader to my own contributions to this question: "A Reply to '1 Corinthians 11:17-34: The Lord's Supper'" in E. Calvin Beisner, ed., *The Auburn Avenue Theology: Pros and Cons* (Fort Lauderdale, FL: Knox Theological Seminary, 2004), 297-304; more fully, "Paedocommunion" in David Hagopian, ed., *Beyond the Basics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, forthcoming).

These arguments raise a number of hermeneutical questions, among which are the following:

1. The rule requiring circumcision on the eighth day and the rules of access to the Israel's feasts are *ritual* ordinances, governing the manner of celebration for ceremonies. Likewise, the admission requirements for access to baptism and the Supper are ceremonial regulations for the church. The paedo-arguments² assume that "ceremonial" regulations of the old covenant have "ceremonial" import in the new. Do we have any New Testament warrant to appeal to Old Testament "ceremonial" regulations to support New Testament "ceremonial" practices? Or, do the ceremonial regulations of Israel get "moralized," "spiritualized," or "humanized" as they cross the threshold between Malachi and Matthew (or between cross and resurrection)?³

2. But the paedo-arguments assume a typological hermeneutic in which Old Testament persons, institutions, and events not only typify Jesus Christ but also have some regulatory authority in the church.⁴ In medieval terms, the paedo-arguments assume that the Old Testament contains not only "allegories" of Christ but also moral and ritual "tropologies" applicable to the church; or, in Augustinian terms, these arguments assume that the Old Testament is typological not of Jesus simply but of the *totus Christus*, the whole Christ, both head and body. Circumcision points

2. For simplicity's sake, I bundle together the arguments for paedobaptism and paedocommunion under the phrase "paedo-arguments."

3. For the sake of argument, I assume here that distinctions can readily be made between "moral" and "ceremonial" rules, though I am deeply skeptical about the usefulness of that distinction. Markus Bockmuehl is correct to insist that "the very distinction between moral, civil, and ceremonial laws, aside from being unknown to the Old and New Testaments and to Judaism, is legally unworkable and practically awkward. Who would confidently classify the laws about gleaning or the taking of a bird's nest, not to mention the Sabbath and the command about images?" (*Jewish Law in Gentile Churches: Halakhah and the Beginning of Christian Public Ethics* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000], 149n14). In this essay, "ceremonial" regulations have to do with liturgical forms and patterns, while "moral" covers all other spheres of life.

4. For the purposes of this essay, I assume the legitimacy of a typological hermeneutic that sees all the Old Testament fulfilled in Jesus. I have defended some aspects of typological interpretation in the introductions to my *A House for My Name* (Moscow, ID: Canon, 2000), 17–42, and *A Son To Me* (Moscow, ID: Canon, 2003). See also James B. Jordan, *Through New Eyes* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2000), and Richard M. Davidson, *Typology in Scripture: A Study of Hermeneutical TYPOS Structures* (Andrews University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series; Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1981).

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THE TESTIMONY OF THE ANCIENT CHURCH

BLAKE PURCELL

PAEDOCOMMUNION HAS BEEN AND CONTINUES to be the practice of all the ancient bodies of Eastern Christianity. But since the 1200's, Western Christendom has been debating the question of how and why children should be allowed to the Lord's table. In about 1418, "Good King Wenceslas" faced 50,000 Hussite men in Bohemia who were willing to fight and die before they would see their infant children suspended from Holy Communion. The Hussites denounced those "who have allowed their own will to triumph, rather than the authority of Scripture, in the matter of infant communion."¹ King Wenceslas was so alarmed he made major concessions to the Hussites.

One of the grand traditions of the Reformation faith, in all three of its major denominational expressions—Lutheran, Episcopalian and Reformed—is its attitude toward church history. Alister McGrath puts it this way: "The magisterial Reformation (Lutheran and Reformed churches) was theologically conservative . . . Equally, it is hardly surprising that *we find the*

1. David R. Holeton, "The Communion of Infants and Hussitism" in *Communio Viatorum* 27 (Prague: Charles University, 1984), 27:4:216.

reformers appealing to the fathers as generally reliable interpreters of Scripture” (italics mine).²

In short, the Reformers of the Lutheran, Anglican, and Reformed ilk viewed church history as the Westminster Confession sees it in 31.3: “*All synods or councils since the apostles’ times may err. Therefore, they are not to be made a rule of faith, or practice; but to be used as a help in both.*” Therefore, I present this chapter as a help to our study of the Scriptures on the practice of whole-church communion.

THE TESTIMONY OF THE ANCIENT CHURCH

The following quotes show in their authority, consistency, antiquity, and geographical diversity that the practice of paedocommunion was widespread in the ancient church. At the same time, anyone who has studied the records of the early church is immediately struck by two facts. From 70 to 150 AD we have few extant writings. We are left to surmise and to work with very few primary reference materials in the earliest period and some which are believed to be dated within that period, but no demonstrable proof can fully assure us. As we consider the early sources, note that the ancient fathers were notoriously “of their own time.” They often speak in ways with which we are unaccustomed. It scandalizes evangelicals when they routinely attribute the whole of salvation to the sacraments. Perhaps it will aid the modern evangelical reader to remember that these men faced persecution and sometimes martyrdom in order to gather on the Lord’s Day, be washed with water, and eat bread and drink wine with their brethren. They were not lacking in faith, as we so often suppose from their high view of sacramental efficacy.

We begin with evidence from the earlier sources, and move onto sources from later periods. We will interact with several church texts that have been used to support the theory that the early church suspended children from the Lord’s table after that, and look at the protests against their suspension in the Western Church. Finally, we will draw some conclusions from the evidence extant. (All italics are mine.)

The Constitution of James the Brother of John, the Son of Zebedee; 60 AD; Palestine; from *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles*, Book 8, Chapter 13:

And after that, let the bishop partake, then the presbyters, and deacons . . . and then the women . . . the widows; *then the children; and then all the people* in order, with reverence and godly fear, without tumult . . . let the deacon say: now we have received the precious

2. Alister McGrath, *Reformation Thought* (Oxford UK: Blackwell, 1998), 145.

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THE POLEMICS OF INFANT COMMUNION

GREGG STRAWBRIDGE

THE MATTER OF CHILDREN AT COMMUNION evokes strong convictions on both sides of the practice (inclusion and exclusion). Currently, paedocommunion is not the received tradition of the West, generally, nor of Reformed and Presbyterian traditions specifically.¹ Nevertheless, from the third century there is much evidence showing that the Western church regularly communed little children, and, even in the last few decades, a growing number of Reformed churches and officers have embraced the practice.²

1. This title is meant to call to mind B. B. Warfield's excellent article "The Polemics of Infant Baptism" answering the Baptist theologian A. H. Strong's anti-paedobaptist arguments.

2. G. I. Williamson (OPC) and Robert Rayburn (PCA) led study committees and produced substantial defenses of the practice. Beyond those from the CREC, PCA, CRC, and the REC within this book, other prominent paedocommunionists include N. T. Wright (Anglican), William Willimon (United Methodist), and, of course, there are several traditions practicing paedocommunion, such as Eastern Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Reformed Episcopalian (discretion of local church), Evangelical Catholic Church (which subscribes to the Formula of Concord), much of Anglicanism, and some Lutherans.

THE PROBLEM OF CONSISTENCY

I remember candidly challenging a Presbyterian, while I was a Baptist: “You can’t baptize babies because they’re in the covenant, and then require them to confess their faith before communion. What’s sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. You can’t have it both ways. If children are in the covenant, then they are all the way in.”

At the time, as a “new covenant” Baptist, I argued that only regenerate people are in the new covenant people of God. You can read about my conversion on that point in *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*.³ I believe that I was flat wrong about the nature of the new covenant. But my argument, it seems to me, is still cogent. Both baptism and communion are covenantal sacraments. Those in covenant have a right to the rite.

THEOLOGICAL CONSISTENCY

If you believe in infant baptism as a Reformed believer, you probably do so because you hold that the child of even one believer is a rightful heir of the redemptive covenant first clearly disclosed to Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3, 17:7ff). And since baptism is a sign of this redemptive administration in the new covenant era, even infants born into the household of a believer are to be baptized.

Some of the most well-known representatives of the Reformed tradition have made this kind of argument. Louis Berkhof, the writer of the well-known and loved systematic theology, argues just this way. He states the “covenant is still in force and is essentially identical with the ‘new covenant’ of the present dispensation.”⁴ He says,

But if children received the sign and seal of the covenant in the old dispensation, the presumption is that they surely have a right to receive it in the new, to which the pious of the Old Testament were taught to look forward as a much fuller and richer dispensation. Their exclusion from it would require a clear and unequivocal statement to that effect, but quite the contrary is found — Matthew 19:14; Acts 2:39; 1 Corinthians 7:14.⁵

But, then, why not inclusion in covenant communion? Does covenant

3. If you are working through these issues, I highly commend the essays in this volume, written by more than a dozen pastors and scholars, published by Presbyterian and Reformed (Philipsburg, NJ, 2003).

4. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 2nd rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1941), 633.

5. Berkhof, 634.