

Paedocommunion: Children at the Lord's Table?

By Peter Barnes

There are many things in life that remind us that we look through the glass darkly. We wish we understood more than we do. The classic Presbyterian view is that children are included in God's covenant of grace, and so are baptized. There is thus a continuity between the sign and seal of circumcision being given to male infants in the Old Testament, and the receiving of baptism in the New (Gen.17:12-13; Deut.29:10-12; Isa.59:21; Acts 2:38-39; 8:12; 16:14-15, 31-34; 1 Cor.1:16; 7:14). If that is so, there is a certain logic in claiming that if infants of believing parents – or a believing parent – receive one sacramental sign, they ought also to receive the other, namely, the Lord's Supper.

The Westminster Larger Catechism, however, points out in Question and Answer 177 that baptism is administered only once, even to infants, while the Lord's Supper is to be administered often, and 'that only to such as are of years and ability to examine themselves.' Question 81 of the Heidelberg Catechism asks: 'Who are to come to the table of the Lord?' The answer given in: 'Those who are truly displeased with themselves because of their sins and yet trust that these are forgiven them and that their remaining weakness is covered by the suffering and death of Christ, and who also desire more and more to strengthen their faith and amend their life. But hypocrites and those who do not repent eat and drink judgment upon themselves.'

In the Reformed confessions, baptism is the rite of initiation; the Lord's Supper is the rite of confirmation. According to Cornelis Venema, the practice of paedocommunion (admitting children to the Lord's Supper) became normal practice of the Church in the fourth and fifth centuries. It is difficult to be certain about this. In a sermon, possibly delivered one Wednesday in 416, on Psalm 38 (Psalm 39 in our numbering), the great bishop of Hippo cited 1 Corinthians 3:1-2, and added: 'This is how we address a little child,

who needs to be nourished with holy milk at the breast of Mother Church, and so eventually made capable of sharing the Lord's table.' The evidence from Augustine goes both ways, but here at least he seems to imply that children did not participate in the Lord's Supper.

Did children participate in the Passover? They were meant to see enough to ask: 'What do you mean by this service?' (Ex.12:26) But infants would have struggled with the roasted lamb, the unleavened bread and the bitter herbs (Ex.12:8), as well as the cup of blessing which was a cup of wine (1 Cor.10:16). Hence some of the wayward Corinthian congregation managed to get drunk at communion (1 Cor.11:21). None of this seems suitable for an infant. Before we take part in the Lord's Supper we are told to examine ourselves (1 Cor.11:28-31). Archbishop Glenn Davies favours communion to be given to the children of Christians. Accordingly, he points to 1 Corinthians 10:1-4 which says that in the exodus, all Israelites were baptized into Moses and all ate the same spiritual food and all drank the same spiritual drink. Here the Old Testament privileges are spoken of in New Testament terms. This may prove too much – animals too participated in the spiritual food and drink in the wilderness or they would not have survived.

Ultimately, the elders of a congregation must interpret the Scriptures as best we can (Heb.13:7, 17), with the light provided by those who have gone before us. There are Reformed brethren who allow parents to permit their children to eat and drink the Lord's Supper, but we remain unconvinced that this is right, according to the Reformed confessions, and, more vitally, according to Scripture. Pray that your children will come to saving faith in Christ and confirm that faith and so be led to communicant membership of the body of Christ and joining in the Lord's Supper.

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