

A Biblical-Historical Case for Children at the Supper

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At the request of the elders, I have assembled a biblical/historical case for involving children in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Their intent was not yet to endorse inviting children to the table but to dig a little deeper than some of the arguments from tradition and the influences of our American culture (Cultural influences cut both ways, on the one hand stressing individualism where our personal choices make all the difference and on the other challenging the standards of Christian faith as too restrictive).

Our tradition, since our roots in John Calvin's teachings during the Protestant Reformation, has been to require a profession of faith (or more minimally for visitors, a personal acceptance of Christ) before admitting someone to the table. Biblically we have justified that stance solely upon 1 Corinthians 11:27-29, *"So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. 28 Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. 29 For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves."* It is such a weighty passage, that seldom have we stepped beyond it to look at the larger scope of scripture and practice of the early church.

We will return to this passage before the end, but first we should look at the larger picture.

Passover Roots

The Lord's Supper is of one piece with the Old Testament Passover, carefully designed to echo and complete it. Jesus instituted the Supper at his final Passover meal with the disciples. A major theme of the gospels is that Jesus is the fulfillment of a number of Old Testament rituals, the Passover in particular foreshadowing his death as the Lamb of God to rescue us from the bondage of sin.

Paul, a little earlier in his letter to the Corinthians makes the tie directly, *"6 Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough? 7 Get rid of the old yeast, so that you may be a new unleavened batch—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. 8 Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old bread leavened with malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. (1 Corinthians 5)"*

A study of the Old Testament indicates that covenant children participated in the household and communal celebrations of the Passover (Exod. 12:3-4, 21-26) and other sacred meals of remembrance (Deut. 12:6-7). Indeed their inclusion was part of the point. The celebrations were intended as teaching points. Children were supposed to ask questions and parents were supposed to use the opportunity to instruct their children about God and his saving grace. This is how the kids got to know their God.

So who exactly was allowed to join in the Passover? Those who were either native Israelites or foreigners who converted to faith in God indicated by being circumcised and having all members of their household circumcised were eligible (Exodus 12) if they were ceremonially "clean." Those who were unclean were required to become clean and celebrate at a later date (Numbers 9).

The Practice of the Early Church

The practice of the early church seems to have followed the model of Passover in most aspects*. Paul makes it clear that the supper was conducted in the context of a larger meal (1 Corinthians 11). Who exactly was invited to participate in the Supper is not explicit from the witness of scripture itself. However, early church records seem to indicate that the covenant community including children and those who had been converted to the Christian faith took part.

The *Apostolic Constitutions* (written between 90-350 A.D.) describe normal practice as having a worship service open to the public before changing over to a private celebration of the Supper. There was a formal announcement, "Let none of the catechumens, let none of the hearers, let none of the unbelievers, let none of the heterodox, stay here." [not exactly seeker friendly] After they left, the leader would issue the following invitation, "*Let the mothers receive their children*; let no one have anything against any one; let no one come in hypocrisy; let us stand upright before the Lord with fear and trembling, to offer." What follows next is a very careful, comprehensive, four-and-a-half page long prayer. Near the end of the prayer, the people *in attendance* are prayed for according to their differing circumstances, a list including children specifically. And just in case we suspect that the infants and children were present but did not commune, the author of the Constitutions then describes the order in which those present were to come to the Lord's Supper. "And after that, let the bishop partake, then the presbyters, and deacons, and sub-deacons, and the readers, and the singers, and the ascetics; and then of the women, the deaconesses, and the virgins, and the widows; *then the children*; and then all the people in order, with reverence and godly fear, without tumult."

The article (http://www.reformed.org/sacramentology/tl_paedo.html) which I borrowed much of the last paragraph from identifies numerous other documents from the early church which note the presence of children at the Supper. This is not to argue that we ought to be copying every aspect of ancient worship. Of note, though, is the continuity between those who were included in and excluded from the Supper and the Old Testament pattern set by the Passover and other feasts. Children were included in the covenant community of believers. Those who were not yet been baptized or who had issues in their life that needed to be resolved (unsettled conflicts with others, hypocrisy, etc.) were asked not to take part. That makes sense because New Testament Christian faith is rooted in the history of Old Testament Israel. Israelite children were naturally included so Christian children would have been as well. Jewish boundaries were expanded to include gentiles, but gentiles who responded in faith. Ceremonial uncleanness was replaced by unrepented sin, particularly breaches in relationship (cf. Matthew 5:21-24, Matthew 18:15-35).

So When Did Children Stop Coming?

Change happens slowly in the church with some congregations (and members) changing before things become official and some changing after. In this case most of the change (the Eastern Orthodox churches never did change on this topic) took place the century before and the century after 1215. In that year the Fourth Lateran Council officially approved the doctrine of transubstantiation, that the bread and wine actually become the literal body and blood of Jesus). This notion had two effects on the celebration of the Lord's Supper. First it created a fear of mishandling of the elements that caused people to back off from participating in the Supper. Initially it was the wine as people stopped drinking from the cup and received only the bread. But even that was done on more infrequent basis. This was especially true of children who would be more likely to make a mistake. The second effect was to put more emphasis on the warning of 1 Corinthians 11 about discerning the body and eating and drinking judgment to oneself. This increased the level of anxiety so that, by the time of the Reformation, most lay people only took part in communion the minimum once per year required by the Roman Catholic Church. Many took part even less than that. One of John Calvin's challenges was to get participation back up to four times per year. [Oddly enough that minimum became our new standard]

*The main difference was the issue of frequency. The Passover was a once a year event. The Lord's Supper was celebrated either every week or every time believers got together where they could share a meal depending on your interpretation of Acts 2:46, Acts 20:7, and 1 Corinthians 11.

What about 1 Corinthians 11:27-29?

This passage is a prime example of the importance of reading a passage in its context. Paul is not chastising the Corinthians for misunderstanding what the elements represented or mishandling them in some procedural fashion. The body of Christ being misused was the body of believers. Instead of engaging in a potluck-style love feast, wealthy believers would show up early and have a private supper club. Poor, working class believers would come after work and get only leftovers. It was a source of division within the church. This is clearest in the verses immediately preceding his warning, "20 So then, when you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, 21 for when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk. 22 Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? Certainly not in this matter!"

Paul expands on this in the previous chapter when states that the church is one body because we all partake in the one loaf [of communion bread]. He also continues the theme into the next two chapters where he first describes the church as the body of Christ in which every member needs the others and then chapter 13 where he describes the nature of Christian love. The primary examination he is calling us to is an examination of our relationships to each other. Are we loving and including each other as brothers and sisters in Christ? Is everyone included in our celebration who ought to be there?

Oddly enough, in excluding our children from the meal in order to protect them from taking judgment on themselves, we may inadvertently be committing the error Paul was arguing against: excluding those who belong.

Not Just Us

Oddly enough it isn't just the Christian Reformed Church that has been wrestling with these issues. A number of Reformed denominations have also been studying. Here are some tidbits from the report of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (usually a couple notches more conservative than ours on contemporary issues) as they wrestled with objections on whether children could fulfill the requirements of 1 Corinthians 11:27-29.

a. "Children can't examine themselves"

The interpretation of I Corinthians 11:23-32 has suffered greatly as a result of a liturgical usage of these "words of institution" in the history of the Church. As a result, the warnings and instructions of the apostle have been abstracted from their context in the letter (i.e., vv. 17-34). With the passage of time, the interpretation of these words has developed in isolation from that broader context and the immediate historical setting. Consequently the understanding and application of this passage have become increasingly broad and absolute. A case in point, which is of central concern to this present study, is the way in which the warnings and instructions of this passage have been used as grounds for the exclusion of young covenant children from participation in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper...

Can a covenant child "examine himself" as commanded here in the sense in which Paul uses it? Leaving aside the question of the relevance of this command to the Corinthian children or to our contemporary covenant children (see below), we can answer the question with a qualified "Yes." It is possible for a covenant child, when tested (cf. I Cor. 10:13), to demonstrate by his words and behavior that he is living a godly life which seeks the approval of God. Such faithfulness can be observed even in a young child by both parents, elders, and other members of the church...

Casting the question and answer in this light clearly illustrates how inadequate the traditional view of "self-examination" is in light of Paul's teaching in the context of I Corinthians 11. While the periods of pietistic introspection which have become a customary part of our celebrations of the Lord's Supper may have value to some, they are certainly not what Paul is commanding in this passage. Therefore to keep young covenant children back from the Table because they cannot engage in such "soul-searching," is simply unbiblical. They are not required by this Scripture to do so, nor is anyone else. What everyone is required to do – demonstrate by godly living that we have God's approval – can be done by young children as well as adults, and is regularly done by many of our covenant children today.

b. "Children can't discern the body of Christ"

The reference in Paul's instructions to "discern the body" has most often been taken to mean that a communicant must recognize the Lord's body, symbolized by the bread of

the Supper, and, in eating, reflect upon Christ's death and its significance for the communicant.

Without minimizing the importance of the symbolism of the bread and wine in the Supper, or the central importance of the death of Christ for God's saving work on behalf of His sinful people, we are still forced to ask if that is indeed what Paul has in mind in this context. When Paul wants to refer to the communion elements, and that which they symbolize, in this passage, he always mentions them both together (cf. vv. 26, 27, 28). So we must look in another direction for the significance of the term "body" in verse 29.

Can children "discern" (i.e., recognize) the uniqueness of life within the body of the church as over against life in the world? Of course they can, and they are trained to do so in covenant homes and by faithful churches. Covenant children are regularly taught that the distinctions that mean a great deal to the world – racial distinctions, social and economic status, etc. – are not important in the church. What is more, covenant children are often more amenable to such instruction than adult members!

If a situation arose in one of our churches similar to the Corinthian situation, could covenant children be trained to respond appropriately to racial, social, or economic distinctions within the body? They certainly could. We doubt that it was the children in the congregation at Corinth that were creating the problem Paul addresses in this passage, though some may have followed the poor example of their parents. As Paul's instructions began to have their effect in the Corinthian congregation, and adults began to change their ways in light of their new "discretion," it is hard to imagine that the children of the congregation would have held back, and stubbornly maintained class-conscious distinctions.

A young child may not be able to grasp all the nuances of sacramental theology with respect to the symbolism of the Lord's Supper – though they often do better than they are given credit for (adult communicants do not set a very good standard to follow). But is that what Paul is calling them to in the passage? We think not. Further, the very common tendency in our churches to identify this "discernment" (and the "self-examination" that is seen to attend it) with the act of "making a credible (public) profession of faith" is even farther from the context. We have argued elsewhere that such a requirement has no grounds elsewhere in Scripture, and warrant certainly cannot be found here either (without considerable forcing of the passage to say what we want it to say).

<http://www.hornes.org/theologia/1988-opc-study-committee/majority-report-in-favor-of-paedocommunion>

The Promise Is for You and Your Children

The bottom line seems to be that the introduction of the notion of transubstantiation did more than create false notions about what happens to the bread and wine during the meal. It changed how we approach it. Instead of seeing the supper as a celebration of Christ and his salvation that can feed our spiritual life, the Lord's Supper became a solemn duty that could easily backfire and do more harm than good. Instead of embracing it on a regular basis, believers began to avoid it themselves and keep it from their children. For children it became an opportunity to learn by watching instead of an opportunity to learn by doing.

It may do well to ask what message we send our children when we exclude them. The bread and wine come by and the children long to take part but are told, "The body and blood are not for you, at least

not yet. You're not old enough." The children know the bread and the wine are gifts from Jesus, but apparently Jesus doesn't want to give himself to them. The children are taught to pray "Our Father" at home, but then at church they find that this heavenly Father might get angry with them if they don't eat in just the right way. The warnings connected with the Supper don't mean anything to them since they don't participate anyway. The Supper – the most tangible sign Christ can offer to show them that he loves them — is simply not for them. They have to earn his love by making profession of faith first. Somehow that message seems backwards.

Greg Rowe spent a great deal of time studying this issue as his denomination was discussing it, finally changing his mind to opening the table to children. He states, "When I shared my exegetical discoveries with my wife she responded simply, 'Of course. If Jesus showed up at our doorstep for supper we wouldn't send the kids to their rooms, would we? Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners. Why wouldn't He eat with our kids?'"