

Children and Communion: Why the Eucharist Should Be Given to the Smallest Christians

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Eastern Orthodox communion of a toddler¹

¹ No photo credit. Found at <https://orthocath.wordpress.com/2010/01/09/infants-sharing-in-the-lords-table/> Accessed 7/16/2015.

At what age may a Christian child take communion? The answers to this question have varied among Catholics and Protestant groups that baptize babies. Largely it depends on when they believe certain qualifications have been met: Are the children morally worthy? Have they examined themselves? Can they discern the body? These instructions from 1 Cor. 11:27-29 mostly set the terms of conversation.

The Eastern Orthodox, on the other hand, commune babies at their baptism. This practice was followed by most or all of the West in earlier centuries,² and some Protestants have recently allowed or advocated for it.³ Rather than searching for specific markers that must be observed in a child's faith and understanding, the church offers communion for all baptized babies. This practice is sometimes called paedocommunion. This paper will discuss whether the bread and wine should be given to babies as young as infants – at least in theory. In practice, many Protestant advocates of paedocommunion prefer to avoid forcing the elements on a child. It may be best, then, to wait until the child is weaned and regularly eating solid foods.⁴ However, this delay is not a test or qualification, but a practical consideration.

Should parents number their children among God's people? The question of infant communion has important consequences, for it eliminates the sacramental need for a phase when the child comes to a "new level." Rather, the qualification for Eucharist is baptism and living in accord with that baptism – through Christian nurture and according to a growing understanding of the faith.

This paper pursues biblical lines of argument in favor of paedocommunion. The New Testament supports an equation of the faithful, baptized body with Eucharistic participation, and the Old Testament gives further elaboration about children participating in sacramental meals. Finally, a broad biblical theology of children in the covenant requires that we affirm our children as full members of God's covenant people. Therefore, Christian parents should be allowed and encouraged to share in the Church's feast with their entire baptized families.

New Testament: One Loaf for One Baptized Body

We begin with a simple form of the New Testament argument for infant communion.

² See Appendix A for a brief history.

³ Lutherans, Anglicans, and Reformed churches have all debated the topic heavily amongst themselves, and tolerations exist in some of their bodies while others have proscribed it. A running list of American Protestant churches that permit infant communion can be found at <http://paedocommunion.com/churches/>. While Roman (Latin Rite) Catholics require an "age of reason," they recognize the Eastern practice as legitimate (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1244, 1292) – note that the Catholic case is therefore not based on 1 Cor. 11:17-34, but on a practical difference of how to unite or emphasize the various sacraments.

⁴ Tim Gallant, *Feed My Lambs: Why the Lord's Table Should Be Restored to Covenant Children* (Grand Prairie, AB: Pactum Reformanda, 2002), 191-192.

Paul gives an analogy between the sacramental loaf and the church in 1 Cor. 10:17: “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body.”⁵ The apostle’s broad concern of confronting divisions in the Corinthian church is set in contrast against an image of unity – all eat the one loaf at the meal. The immediate context is in verse 16, how the bread is “participation” in Jesus’ own sacrificed body. In this way, through that communion in Jesus’ redemptive body – all believers partaking of that one body – we become tied to each other. It is important to note that the one bread does not simply symbolize the body in itself, as grain sitting on a plate; rather, we are one church body, “*for we all partake of the one bread.*” The bread does just *show* the unity of the Christian body – but through participating together in Christ’s work in that meal, we are made into that one body.

Who is this ecclesial body, receiving Eucharist together? Addressing again the need for unity, Paul soon makes clear another element of unity: “For in one Spirit we were all *baptized into one body* – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and all were made to drink of one Spirit” (12:13). The means of clearing away intra-Christian divisions are here baptism. This is reminiscent of the way Paul stresses unity in Ephesians: “There is one body and one Spirit ... one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Eph. 4:4-5). In all three of these passages, unity is tied to “one body,” which can apparently be defined in terms of baptism or Eucharist. In all three, the key is how those sacraments tie us to the sole and united redeemer: Christ (1 Cor 10:16), the one Spirit (1 Cor 12:13), one God and Father of all (Eph 4:6).

If infants are baptized, the general structure of one loaf/one body/one baptism gives a strong impetus toward the communing of those small children, unless the purposes and blessings of baptism and Eucharist are different enough to warrant a revision to the general apostolic framework. But what, indeed, is the Eucharist for?

Through it, we participate in the Messiah’s fleshly body that worked out our salvation. We receive sacramentally what was poured out on the cross (Mt. 26:28), the “body of flesh” in whose death was reconciliation (Col. 1:22) and which we receive “through faith in Jesus Christ” (Gal. 2:16). Baptism likewise appropriates Christ’s death and resurrection life to us sacramentally – we were “buried with him in baptism ... [and] raised with him through faith” (Col. 2:11-12). That is, we were “baptized into his death” (Rom. 6:3). Participation in Jesus’ death and resurrection, and their benefits, is thus common in the sacraments. Furthermore, Eucharist (Mt. 26:28), baptism (Acts 2:38), Christ’s work (Eph. 1:7), and faith (Acts 10:43) all pertain to the forgiveness of sins in their own ways. The two sacraments share a common focus and source. They should not be divorced as separate stages of spiritual development. If infants are baptized, they are eligible for communion along with the rest of the church body.⁶

New Testament: 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

⁵ All Scripture citations are ESV, unless otherwise noted.

⁶ This paper assumes infant baptism, in the interest of space.

1 Corinthians 11 is the linchpin argument against paedocommunion.⁷ We will see below that children's participation is likely or explicit in many Old Testament sacramental feasts, most of which are explicitly fulfilled by Jesus' work of redemption (and all at least implicitly). If children partook of OT sacramental feasts, and especially the ones most clearly prefiguring Eucharist, then an explicit NT command would be needed to deny them the NT sacramental feast. In 1 Cor. 11, opponents of paedocommunion think they have that command.⁸

The passage (vv. 17-34) may be summarized thus: some Christians caused divisions during the Lord's Supper and apparently took food to the detriment of others (vv. 17-22). Paul says this action despises the church of God, so he goes on to remind them of how Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper (vv. 23-26). Verses 27-29 speak generically (not just toward the specific trouble-makers) about how the Corinthians should act during communion, and Paul applies these principles to how the Corinthians have been disciplined by God (vv. 30-32) and sums up how they ought to be acting (vv. 33-34).

The highest point of controversy is the general wording Paul uses in vv. 27-29:

²⁷ Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹ For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.

The pronouns are "whoever," "a person," and "anyone." The question is, are children included in these general pronouns? If so, how can they examine themselves and discern the body, and therefore achieve the status of "worthy"? If they cannot, then we must withhold them so they do not receive the judgments of vv. 30-32.⁹

Taking the passage narrowly, as it is quoted above, would seem to indicate that *whoever*, *a person*, and *anyone* actually do refer to every individual. Then again, the mere presence of a word like "anyone" does not automatically apply to every possible person. 1 Thess. 3:10 reads "If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat." We all pass over children when applying the passage – the context is clearly about the idleness of adults.¹⁰

⁷ Cf. Cornelius Venema, *Children at the Lord's Table? Assessing the Case for Paedocommunion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2009), 102.

⁸ Eg. George W. Knight III, "1 Corinthians 11:17-34: The Lord's Supper: Abuses, Words of Institution and Warnings and the Inferences and Deductions with Respect to Paedocommunion," in *Children and the Lord's Supper: Let a Man Examine Himself*, eds. Guy Waters and Ligon Duncan (Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2011), 75-95.

⁹ As suggested by Guy Prentiss Waters and J. Ligon Duncan III, "Introduction," in *Children and the Lord's Supper*, 28.

¹⁰ It is worth noting that Calvin cited the inapplicability of 1 Thess 3:10 to children when he shows that the repentance command does not apply to infant baptism (*Institutes* 4.16.28-29), though he fails to apply the same argument to the examination command in 1 Cor. 11:28 (*Institutes* 4.16.30). Cf. Gregg Strawbridge, "The Polemics of Infant Communion," in *The Case for Covenant Communion*, 158.

Likewise, 1 Cor. 11:17-34 refers to people who are dividing the congregation through their selfish table manners. That could be applied to certain children, but certainly is not the case with most. In churches today, the sacrament is not withheld from toddlers because of their divisiveness, but because of their cognitive inabilities, such as examination and discernment of the body (v. 28-29).

The general command to examine oneself is thus taken to be an inspection of sin, or spiritual inventory-taking. That view of examination looks toward finding ourselves “worthy” as in v. 27, or even considers a person unworthy who has not done so. Tim Gallant resists the temptation to combine the “unworthy” designation in verse 27 with the examination requirement of verse 28:

Some have actually suggested, by tying together verses 27 and 28, that eating without self-examination *is* eating in an unworthy manner. Those who do not examine themselves *by that fact* eat unworthily.

But that is not what Paul says. The Corinthians *were* eating in an unworthy manner – and Paul has described just how that was so in the preceding (v. 21). The reason he introduces self-examination is a *preventative measure*. The sin, in context, is not lack of self-examination. The sin is schism at the table, which Paul hopes to *counter* by calling for self-examination. There is a world of difference between these two views of the passage.¹¹

Gallant claims this interpretation is later confirmed by verse 34, where the Corinthians are told to eat at home if they are hungry, “lest you come together unto judgment.” The judgment Paul has in mind in verse 34, as in verse 27, is due to divisive table manners. Jeffrey Myers emphasizes, “it was not the *immature* with whom the Lord was not pleased, but the *disobedient*.”¹²

Regarding this interpretation, we should first note that Gallant may be overstepping when he says that Paul “introduces self-examination.” We don’t have anything in the context to know whether it was already a requirement – though it was not at the first Eucharist and the Corinthians were not practicing it, so the interpretation may be likely. Nevertheless, even if this was not a new rule, Gallant is correct that self-examination is a preventative against unworthy eating, an honest precaution rather than part of the substance of worthiness/unworthiness itself.

That is an important distinction. If children are unable to examine, they are necessarily unworthy under the one framework. Under the other (paedocommunion), they are potentially unworthy, but not necessarily. To the extent that the child is unable, the parent would be responsible for this check, and would themselves bear the “worthiness” in their Christian parenting. Of course, this parental requirement is not explicit in the Eucharist texts, as it is not in

¹¹ Gallant, 90-91. Emphasis original.

¹² Jeffrey Myers, “Presbyterian, Examine Thyself: Restoring Children to the Table,” in *The Case for Covenant Communion*, 32.

the baptism texts, so we will need a strong theology of parents and children in the covenant. This is pursued below in the section, “Biblical Theology: Infants in the Covenant.”

So, what baptized Christians should be excluded from the table? Gallant emphasizes the original context of divisive eating in 1 Cor 11. Rom. 16:17 and Titus 3:9 reiterate the same. However, there are other contexts for breaking table fellowship. Matthew 18 requires of the church that an obstinate sinner who refuses correction would be to them “as a Gentile and a tax collector.” 1 Corinthians 5 requires the church to remove those with gross sexual immorality from the assembly. This same passage refers to their meeting as a Passover festival (v. 7-8), and warns the Christians not to associate with anyone “guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or [who] is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler – *not even to eat with such a one*” (v. 11). These and similar verses¹³ refer to people who continually refuse correction of their notorious sins or who openly defy the teaching of the church.

Another context for breaking table fellowship is self-imposed. Matthew 5:23-24 is often applied to the Eucharistic meal: “So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.” This warning against anger is addressed by churches that utilize a “passing of the peace” before the meal, as a last opportunity to do just this. If children are to participate, an age-appropriate concern for relational peace would be an important part of parenting those children.

Therefore: some of the contexts for exclusion from the sacramental feast are divisiveness, obstinate gross sin, teaching in defiance of the church, and relationships marred by anger. However, accounting for the individual peccadillos of the past week is not quite among these. Christ cares about such things, and we cannot fail to address them in our lives. But Paul’s goal is for the table to be as broad as the faithful (and baptized) body. It is a help for imperfect believers, not a measuring stick for them.

What is self-examination, then? Gallant is instructive in pointing out how Isaiah 1 requires high standards for the proper observance of New Moons, Sabbaths, and other assemblies – though children were obviously included in these observances. Does this mean the children were able to “put away evil” in the same way as adults? Or to “seek justice, reprove the oppressor; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow”? Clearly not.¹⁴ The proper observation and self-examination did not set standards in a way to exclude children, but to improve the moral quality of those who were able. Likewise Isaiah 66 and Amos 5.¹⁵ Most important here is that “we should not take [self-examination] to mean that Paul is thereby aiming at cutting down the number of participants in the Supper by means of this test ... He is aiming at a full unity.”¹⁶ Self-

¹³ Similar verses about the obstinately sinful include 1 Tim. 1:20, 2 Thess. 3:6, and a host of OT texts.

¹⁴ Gallant, 92.

¹⁵ Ibid. 93.

¹⁶ Ibid. 95.

examination is a reminder of the imperatives of a life of faith, but we are not rendered unworthy before we can carry all of them out.

Robert Rayburn likewise notes that when the OT prophets call for self-examination and worthiness in worship, they did not set aside God's law to eat sacrifices with sons and daughters.¹⁷ Note that those prophets

were not saying that one must have an adult-like faith in order to participate properly in the worship of God, they were not saying that a certain maturity of mental development was a prerequisite of right worship, and they were not saying that warnings addressed to adult sinners in the nature of the case excluded the little children of those who came to God in faith. *The application of 1 Corinthians 11 to the general question of the participation of children in the Lord's Supper violates the universe of discourse.*¹⁸

One last point on examination. Baptism and repentance are tied together throughout the New Testament. In our church services, repentance typically precedes Eucharist, too. This is simply a continuation of the baptized life, a life of repentance and faith. It is not a step beyond baptism, an "examination" that only the mature can undertake. All who may be baptized may commune, and if churches baptize infants who cannot repent, they can commune infants who do not yet examine.

Finally, we must look at the last verse in this section: "For anyone who eats and drinks without *discerning the body* eats and drinks judgment on himself" (1 Cor. 11:29). Discerning the body is a difficult phrase to interpret, as "the body" plays a dual function in this section of Christ's physical body and the church body. On the one hand, we have v. 24 "This is my body" and v. 27 "the body and blood of the Lord." The latter is the most proximate context for v. 29's *discerning the body*. On the other hand, 1 Cor. 10:17 and the great passage on the body in chapter 12 use "body" to refer to the church.

Of course, the two images overlap in their nature, as the one is a metaphor of the other. Indeed, we call the church the "body" because through the Eucharist we together partake of Jesus' body (1 Cor. 10:16-17). However, they are not the same, or at least not in the same way. Gallant makes a case that while both are included in v. 29 in a sense, the church body is in the foreground, as the passage's pressing concern is for awareness of the church body around us: the summation is v. 33, "So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another."¹⁹

¹⁷ Robert Rayburn, "A Presbyterian Defense of Paedocommunion," in *The Case for Covenant Communion*, 9-11. Rayburn also includes Jer. 7:1-29, Hos. 6:6, Mic. 6:8, and 1 Sam. 15:22, which declaim against the sacrificial worship of the wicked.

¹⁸ Ibid. 11.

¹⁹ Gallant, 97.

If verse 29 is focused on the church body, then the issue is not so much cognitive understanding of a theory of the Real Presence as Paul's concern to establish unity. This concern for propriety in the very act where Christ calls us to unity in himself, the communion meal, is a big deal. It is the thrust of the whole section. As we have seen above, similar concerns were given by the prophets regarding OT sacramental feasts, fasts, and celebrations – but they did not prohibit children's participation in Passover, the Feasts of Weeks and Booths, and certainly not in the Sabbath!²⁰

1 Cor. 11 addresses some very important issues: division, betraying the nature of the Eucharist, Jesus' work in his body, the church. There is no doubt that Paul addresses the situation with broader principles and a broad teaching point, but his concern for unity and worthy eating is similar to the OT prophets: he calls for them to clean up their manners and act like the body of Christ that they are. This carries no implication that children of believers would therefore be excluded for failure to verbally process something about the faith. They were included in the OT sacramental meals and festivals that the prophets had included in their own calls for "worthiness." Rayburn concludes: "If it is once admitted that it is not obvious that Paul's demand in that context has any bearing on the participation of children in the covenant meal, there remains no serious argument against paedocommunion in the Reformed tradition."²¹

Interlude: Between the Testaments

As we move on to discuss the Old Testament precedents and background for New Testament sacraments, it may surprise some to hear OT rituals or feasts called "sacraments." However, such terminology has been widely used in church history. Augustine freely spoke of the "sacraments of the Old Testament."²² Thomas Aquinas observes that in the old ceremonies there were "sacrifices, sacred things, *sacraments*, and observances."²³ John Calvin likewise speaks of the "sacraments of the Jews."²⁴

All these writers make caveats that OT sacraments must have been different in some ways, for the ceremonies were fulfilled in Christ. Therefore, the ceremonies could only partake in what the worshippers could not yet see: "a shadow of the good things to come" (Heb. 10:1). And yet, while the substance was unseen, and not in the OT ceremonial elements themselves, yet by faith they could still partake of the Christ to come. For the Israelites in the desert, their manna was not just physical nourishment, and the water from the rock Moses struck not only slaked their thirst, but they "all ate the same *spiritual* food, and all ate the same *spiritual* drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ" (1 Cor. 10:3). So they spiritually partook of the coming Christ. Furthermore, we will see that OT sacrifices were

²⁰ Unworthy participation in Sabbaths was warned against in Is. 1:13, with no indication that this set a new bar of maturity or age requirement.

²¹ Rayburn, 12.

²² *Contra Faustum*, 19:11-14.

²³ *Summa Theologica*, 2.1 q. 101, a. 4

²⁴ *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.14.20

eaten “before the Lord your God” (Deut. 12:7). Through this shadowy, forward-looking system, believers and their families were drawn near to God by a work they could not yet see.

We will proceed into the Old Testament, then, not by first defining the word “sacrament” and then finding which rites fit with it, but by making our way through the OT precedents for the Eucharist to arrive at a better picture of eating a sacramental meal “before the Lord your God.”

Old Testament: Passover

The Old Testament context for the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper begins with the sacrament of the Passover supper. Passover is the most obvious context for Jesus’ original institution. The synoptic Gospels explicitly identify the Passover meal as the scene of that night (Mt. 26:18-20²⁵). The elements themselves are directly taken from the Passover liturgy.²⁶ Another point of contact is that Passover was, uniquely in the OT, a meal that had a certain interpretation attached, which is of course crucial to the NT sacramental meal.

Furthermore, Jesus himself identifies the institution of the Lord’s Supper as a Passover. In Matthew, immediately after giving the words of institution, Jesus tells us that he will not drink from the fruit of the vine again until he drinks it in His Father’s kingdom (26:29). Luke places these words just before the institution, but the drinking (*eating* in Luke’s case) which is obviously the communion elements in Matthew is just as obviously the Passover elements in Luke: “I have fervently desired to *eat this Passover* with you before I suffer. For I tell you I will not eat of it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God” (22:15-16).

Passover is not the only context for the Eucharist, but it is a primary one. With that in mind, we look to the original Passover in Exodus 12. The first indication of children’s participation is the order to calculate the amount of needed meat based on “what each can eat” or literally, *the mouths of their eating*. The focus appears to be the ability to eat, which includes non-nursing children.²⁷ The phrase, “according to the mouth of his eating” appears in just one other passage – when the Israelites collect manna in the desert. No doubt children were included in that count.²⁸

Later, Moses instructs the Israelites that this rite will be “a statute for you and for your sons forever” (12:24). It might be objected that “sons” here just refers to future generations. However, the phrase “your sons” has the same Hebrew root as the phrase in verse 26: “when

²⁵ Mark is even more theologically explicit: “On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when they sacrificed the Passover lamb” (14:12) which gives occasion not only for the setting but for the relevance of Jesus’ own sacrificed body and blood.

²⁶ Though the wine was not in the OT Passover commands, it was practiced in the first century ceremony. Moreover, the use of wine in OT ceremony has precedent in Melchizedek (Gen. 14:18-19) and in consuming the tithe “before the Lord your God” (Deut. 14:22-26).

²⁷ Gallant, 60-61.

²⁸ Charles Keidel, “Is the Lord’s Supper for Children?” *Westminster Theological Journal* 37 (1975), 307-308.

your sons say to you, ‘What do you mean by this service?’”²⁹ Verse 26 is clearly referring to children who are participating in Passover, so it appears that verse 24 is also. However, none of these verses clearly delineates what age those children are. We will consider later whether these questions constitute a catechetical lesson that would bar younger children from the meal. For now, we may note that the lack of a specific age tends to indicate that all were included rather than failing to specify the age requirement. James Jordan is helpful here:

... there is no passage 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.*³⁰

The book of Deuteronomy contains further comments on Passover, especially as it will be eaten when there is a centralized sanctuary in the Promised Land. Some claim that Deuteronomy 16 limited subsequent Passovers, after the initial one, to adult males. However, we know that Deut. 16 explicitly allows (*requires, even*) children to keep the Feasts of Weeks (v. 11) and Booths (v. 14). The Passover section of this chapter (vv. 1-8) omits this point about children, which has led some to believe that children were therefore omitted from Passover participation. This is unlikely given the points above regarding Exodus 12. Moreover, Passover requirements had already been explained in Ex. 12, so it seems to have required less detail than Weeks and Booths, which are just now being explained.³¹ In itself the lack of command simply indicates that women and children were not necessarily required to participate in the ongoing festival, with its travel to the central worship location – but this does not mean they were not permitted.³²

Indeed, Luke 2:41 reports that Jesus’ *parents* (therefore including Mary) used to go up to Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover.³³ Women, like children, are not included in the Deut. 16:1-8 statutes about Passover, in contrast to those regarding Weeks and Booths. But clearly women did participate in Luke 2. Likewise, Deut. 16:1-8 fails to mention strangers partaking of Passover, which are included in Weeks and Booths, but Ex. 12:48-49 explicitly provides for strangers to partake in Passover. Therefore, the failure to mention children (like women and strangers) in

²⁹ I have tweaked the ESV translation of “children” as “sons” to show the parallel in the Hebrew with v. 24.

³⁰ James Jordan, “Children and Religious Meals of the Old Creation,” in *The Case for Covenant Communion*, ed. Gregg Strawbridge (Monroe, LA: Athanasius Press, 2006), 50. Emphasis added.

³¹ Gallant, 51.

³² Keidel, 313.

³³ *Ibid.*

Deut. 16:1-8, as opposed to their explicit mention in the sections on the Feasts of Weeks and Booths, does not specifically exclude children from Passover.³⁴

But are toddlers excluded by the very words of Ex. 12? Verses 26-27 have the familiar household explanation of the Passover: “And when your children ask you, ‘What does this ceremony mean to you?’ then tell them, ‘It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians.’” John Calvin took this to mean that only those children would eat “who were old enough to be able to inquire into its meaning.”³⁵

However, this scenario of a son asking the meaning from his father is not unique. Josh. 4:6-7 describes memorial stones at the Jordan, “that this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, ‘What do those stones mean to you?’ then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord ... So these stones shall be to the people of Israel a memorial forever.” Deut. 6:20-21 gives an explanation of the law: “When your son asks you in time to come, ‘What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the rules that the Lord our God has commanded you?’ then you shall say to your son, ‘We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt. And the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand...’”

In neither of these cases does a cognitive ability set a standard. Rather, the Scriptures provide answers (meanings) for the natural questions.³⁶ It is true that Passover was a participatory meal (a ritual) rather than a memorial stone or the meaning of the Torah, but in the absence of any other cognitive tests it is most natural to read Ex. 12:26-27 as an explanation of meaning rather than a qualification.³⁷ It is wrong to draw from this text a need for prior catechesis before participating in a sacrament.

Old Testament: Other Feasts

Passover is not the only OT meal that Christ fulfilled. Since the Lord’s Supper is the sole NT sacramental meal, it is worth looking at the other OT feasts and sacrificial meals, which likewise brought the participants close to God. It is important to note this aspect of communion when we examine sacrifices.

Deuteronomy 16 explicitly provides for the participation of children in the Feasts of Weeks and Booths, just as the Exodus 12 instructions had provided for them. It is true that non-Jews could also participate in Weeks and Booths (unlike Passover),³⁸ but it is first of all

³⁴ Gallant, 50, 52.

³⁵ *Institutes* 4.16.30.

³⁶ Gallant, 45.

³⁷ Gallant reads Ex. 12:26-27 as a *positive* case for infant communion: “*because* Passover is mandated for you and your children, this will lead them to question you concerning its meaning and nature” (p. 60).

³⁸ This is on the face of the text, but Gallant argues that the requirements were the same: strangers could participate in *any* feast – if they were circumcised. Circumcision of the strangers is not explicit in the requirements for Weeks

noteworthy that children did participate in these feasts. Deut. 16:10 connects the Feast of Weeks with the freewill offering, and this offering is noted in Deut. 12:6-7 along with many other sacrifices that are to be eaten “before the Lord your God” – a true communion.³⁹ The command for sacramental eating is alongside the household inclusion: “And there you shall eat before the Lord your God, and you shall rejoice, you and your households, in all that you undertake, in which the Lord your God has blessed you.” While the ESV is not explicit that the households are eating with the offeror, the NASB, NIV, NLT, and NRSV make it clear: “you shall eat there in the presence of the Lord your God, you and your households together.” In any case, the Deut. 16:10-11 instructions show that children ate the freewill offering at the Feast of Weeks, so it is logical to use that clarity to resolve any verbal ambiguity in Deut 12:6-7 – children also ate the sacrifices there, too, “before the Lord.” Children ate at Weeks and Booths, and they were true communion meals.

The Israelites were called to sacrifice and eat with their children out of Egypt. James Jordan notes that this sacrifice to God on the mountain was what God had told Moses to call the Israelites to: Yahweh said to tell Pharaoh, “Please let us go a three days’ journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God” (Ex. 3:18⁴⁰). So the journey was a journey to peace with God, as Jordan says.⁴¹ Moses did indeed make that purpose clear to Pharaoh: “We will go *with our young and our old, with our sons and our daughters*, and with our flocks and herds, because we are going to celebrate a festival to the Lord” (Ex. 10:9). Pharaoh offers to permit only the men to go, and Moses knows this will be insufficient (v. 10-11).

Another example of children’s communion is the peace offering. The peace offering was a major part of the Levitical system: Jordan argues that it is the central feature of the Book of Leviticus,⁴² and Matthew Mason notes that lay Israelites could eat this feast, which like other OT sacrifices pointed forward to the sacrifice of Christ (Heb. 10:5-10).⁴³ Part of the ritual included lifting up the breast meat and a part of the thigh as “contribution” for a particular priest (Lev. 7:30-33). Who ate this contribution meat? “But the breast that is waved and the thigh that is contributed you shall eat in a clean place, *you and your sons and your daughters with you, for they are given as your due and your sons’ due from the sacrifices of the peace offerings* of the people of Israel” (Lev. 10:14).⁴⁴ The children of priests ate the sacramental meat along with their fathers.

and Booths, as it is in Ex. 12: 48 for the Passover, but Numbers 15:15-16 states there is one law and custom for Jew and “stranger.” Moreover, the Septuagint translated “stranger” in Deut. 16:11,14 as “proselyte” or convert. (p. 68-69).

³⁹ The others are burnt offerings, sacrifices, tithes and contributions, vow offerings, and the firstborn of the flocks.

⁴⁰ In Ex. 3:12 God tells Moses that it will be a sign that He sent Moses, “when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain.”

⁴¹ Jordan, 53.

⁴² Ibid. 58.

⁴³ Matthew Mason, “Covenant Children and Covenant Meals: Biblical Evidence for Infant Communion,” *Churchman* 121 (2007), 131.

⁴⁴ Cf. Jordan, 59.

In summary, the OT's sacrifices were eaten in a meal of communion with God, which was restored or celebrated. While the substance of this work, Christ, was still to come, faithful participants could hope in their fulfillment and so be brought near to God. Households and children were explicitly included in the meal with respect to Passover, the meal of sacrificial worship that God called the people out of Egypt to; the Feasts of Weeks and Booths; and the Peace Offerings. In none of the OT communion meals are children prohibited.

As we conclude the OT, we should note that the peace offering is important for NT considerations. C. John Collins shows that the Lord's Supper in the NT shows echoes of the OT peace offering. For example, 1 Cor. 10:18 relates the Eucharistic verses of v. 16-17 to the OT sacrifices: "Consider the people of Israel: are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar?" This alludes to the eating of peace sacrifices in Lev. 7:11-18.⁴⁵ Moreover, the Passover itself was a kind of peace offering.⁴⁶ We learned above that peace offerings concluded with a sacrificial meal eaten by children to bring them close to God, along with the rest of the people. The verbal parallels between the peace offering and the NT Lord's Supper provide deeper reasons to suppose that children should partake in the new covenant sacramental meal as well.

Biblical Theology: Infants in the Covenant

The Bible has furnished us with some theological data points: children likely communed with God in the Passover feast, and certainly participated in other sacramental meals. 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 provides no argument against children taking communion, and the point about the baptized body being co-extensive with the loaf (1 Cor. 10:16-17) actually gives an argument in favor of paedocommunion.⁴⁷

We connect these dots together not through imaginative theories, but through what the Bible says about the subtopics of our study. What is God's covenant? How does God consider the believers' children in their young years? Many more Scriptures quickly come into play. We will analyze a few to sketch a theology of infants in the covenant, and to show that paedocommunion is not a discrete theological locus, with a few points of debate, but that it is in the fabric of the biblical witness.

As soon as the Bible begins to hint at something like a covenant, God stresses that families have an important part to play. When God decided to save some from the flood, he did not make a list of the eight most faithful people from the four corners of the earth. Rather, he chose righteous Noah, and along with him, his wife, his sons, and his sons' wives. Likewise, the

⁴⁵ C. John Collins, "The Eucharist as Christian Sacrifice: How Patristic Authors Can Help Us Read the Bible," *Westminster Theological Journal* 66 (2004), 18-19.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 2-4.

⁴⁷ Augustine focused on the need for infants, as sinners, to be saved. This sacramental basis also supports paedocommunion, but it is my opinion that that argument itself needs the support of a theology of families in the covenant to keep it from falling into formalism. An alternative framework is to apply sacraments to the young on the basis of "the faith of the church." We do not here have the space to consider its application to the present question.

promises to Abraham were to bless the nations, but they were to do so through “you and your descendants after you” (Gen. 17:7). Eight-day old infants received the sign of the covenant in every Jewish family, because the promises were for them. Those promises to children include being their God (Gen. 17:7), giving his Spirit (Is. 59:21), offering his righteousness (Ps. 103:17) and forgiveness (Acts 2:28-36), and salvation (Acts 16:31).⁴⁸

Moses described the covenant as inclusive of children – a covenant not just to make promises contingent on their faith, but to actually make them God’s people:

Therefore keep the words of this covenant and do them, that you may prosper in all that you do. You are standing today all of you before the Lord your God: the heads of your tribes, your elders, and your officers, all the men of Israel, *your little ones*, your wives, and the sojourner who is in your camp, from the one who chops your wood to the one who draws your water, *so that you may enter into the sworn covenant of the Lord your God*, which the Lord your God is making with you today, *that he may establish you today as his people*, and that he may be your God, as he promised you, and as he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. (Deut. 29:9-13)

The Bible speaks endearingly of faith from a very young age: “Yet you are he who took me from the womb; you made me trust you at my mother’s breasts. On you was I cast from my birth, and from my mother’s womb you have been my God” (Ps. 22:9-10). The infantile act of nursing is a symbol and a conduit for the faith and trust that will grow over years in a believing family. This does not negate the fact that believing infants, as all children, are conceived in iniquity and original sin (Ps. 51:5). But “it is emphatically clear from Deuteronomy to Proverbs to Ephesians that nurture, not evangelism, is the paradigm of child-rearing in the covenant home.”⁴⁹ While none of us is guaranteed an eternal place in the covenant of grace by our families or anything other than faith in Christ, children of believers can be called “holy” because of their relationship to their parents (1 Cor. 7:14).

Their whole context for living is a life of dependence on God, if this is practiced in the home, and understood as appropriate to their capacities. Indeed, all of us understand that faith according to our capacities. With that basis, covenant children start from the inside of the covenant unless and until they leave it, as branches that grow up in the vine and are discarded, in contrast to branches that grow up outside the vine (people with no family of believing heritage) and are grafted in through newfound faith (Rom. 11:17-24). And how wonderful it is when branches grow up in the vine of grace and continue to abide, with greater maturity.

A maturing child is likely to have some specific moments of deepening faith, but these are not the same as one who hears the gospel for the first time. “Though not impossible, it is

⁴⁸ This list comes from Robert Rayburn, “The Presbyterian Doctrines of Covenant Children, Covenant Nurture, and Covenant Succession,” in *The Case for Covenant Communion*, 187.

⁴⁹ Rayburn, “The Presbyterian Doctrines,” 189.

clearly not the normal expectation in Scripture that a covenant child should experience a conscious conversion or endure a period in which he or she has a sense of standing outside the covenant community, without God and without hope in the world.”⁵⁰ Many covenant children do interpret their deepening faith as a conversion experience, likely due to churches that emphasize such experience, but it would be more biblical to call this fresh repentance, deeper understanding, or maturity: a covenant renewal.⁵¹

The Eucharist is the communion meal for the body of Christ (1 Cor. 10:17) – the covenant, which is marked in baptism (1 Cor. 12:13). We have seen that there are no Biblical standards higher for sacramental meals than there are for coming into God’s covenant family, and also that God seeks to work through families where children are considered inside God’s family. Therefore, children who have been baptized into the body of Christ should share in the Eucharistic body.

Final Thoughts: Eucharist as private sentimental experience

We have considered some of the better arguments for the communion of infants. There are many points to debate within the argument. There are also theological and practical implications that flow from it, one of which we will note only briefly.

One appeal of applying to children the discernment and examination imperatives in 1 Cor. 11 is that they accord with a certain approach to receiving communion. No doubt there is a very personal benefit from the Eucharist, but its corporate character is in the foreground of 1 Cor. 10:16-17 and 1 Cor. 11. Centering one’s experience on a personal examination and, in a sense, an individual communion with the Lord will likely draw affections toward the credocommunion interpretation of 1 Cor. 11:27-29 – certain cognitive actions are made necessary for the spiritual experience. This approach takes the experience of some Christians and mandates it for all. While it is important to keep some baptized people from the fellowship in bread and wine for reasons noted above, these were all related to a danger of reversing one’s baptism or shredding the unity we have in Christ our salvation. It is worth noting that while Reformers did not continue the Roman Catholic theology of mandated private confession, its application of regular spiritual inventory-taking to worthiness in taking the Eucharist may have been incidentally carried over by the Protestants in a different form.⁵²

⁵⁰ Ibid. 191.

⁵¹ Cf. covenant renewals under Josiah (2 Kings 23:1-26) and Nehemiah (Neh. 8).

⁵² Joel Beeke basically admits as much in “‘Only for His Believers’: Paedocommunion and the Witness of the Reformed Liturgies,” in *Children and the Lord’s Supper*, 165. Eugene Brand argues that medieval confirmation practices were also part of this connection:

What the Reformation did latch on to, however, was the medieval connection between confession and communion. Later, when confirmation had become part of the normal Lutheran pattern, it was understood, at least in part, as preparation for first communion. ... Via Confirmation, Lutherans perpetuated the medieval ethos regarding first communion. Before receiving it, one must ‘understand it’ and be able to confess one’s sin – i.e., to be able to examine one’s self. (p. 38)

Again, it is understandable how this sensibility would then interpret 1 Cor. 11:27-29 through this lens. However, Jeffrey Myers offers a reply concerning the passage:

“[Paul] does *not* warn them about eating and drinking without having insufficient devotional preparation: ‘I see some of you looking around when you ought to have your eyes closed and head bowed in meditation on the death of Jesus!’ What he *does* tell them is to wait for each other.”⁵³

As discussed above, the personal examination is a corrective against disunity, to keep the real show in its right place: the church being made one in the work of God’s redemption.

Peter Leithart makes this point brilliantly: “the Eucharist is not the word plus bread and wine, but the word plus the bread and wine eaten and drunk by the gathered people of God. *Action* and *congregation* must be constituent factors of the sacraments and must be included in any adequate definition or theological reflection.”⁵⁴ Or in the words of the apostle, we are one body (*congregation*) because we partake (*action*) of the one bread (1 Cor. 10:17). This congregational vision for the sacrament will tend to be more inviting to infant participation. Using this perspective, it is worth asking: if baptized children are denied, who else? The developmentally disabled? Elderly Christians with Alzheimer’s? These may be the results of an individual, profession-based approach to the meal which puts unnecessary divisions in the baptized body.⁵⁵

Rather, let us celebrate God’s transforming work, drawing us into his saving body to reconcile us all to God through the cross.

Conclusion

We have discussed evidence from the New and Old Testaments, as well as biblical theology, affecting paedocommunion. The Lord’s Supper is a meal sacrament for the covenant community, the body of Christ, and ought to be coextensive with it. Small children may partake of it because their baptism and their Christian parents draw them within that covenant: they are “holy” (1 Cor. 7:14).

With young and old, men and women, joyful and downtrodden, “from the one who chops wood to the one who draws water,”⁵⁶ let us rejoice together: “Christ our Passover is sacrificed; therefore let us keep the feast” (1 Cor. 5:7-8, KJV).

⁵³ Jeffrey Myers, 29-30. Emphasis original.

⁵⁴ Peter Leithart, “The Way Things Really Ought to Be: Eucharist, Eschatology, and Culture,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 59 (1997), 163.

⁵⁵ Myers, 26.

⁵⁶ Deut. 29:11.

Appendix A: A Brief History

How did we get here? *Here* is a Western Church (Catholic and Protestant) that had not communed infants for centuries until recently. The history has some debatable points, but the following are certain: The Eastern church communed infants from at least late in the Patristic era, and they have never stopped. Evidence for paedocommunion in the West goes back to the third century AD, with little countervailing evidence. Actual practices varied in the early medieval period, and in the West the practice was declining by the 12th century. It was completely gone by the time of the Reformation and has only reappeared in the latter half of the 20th century.

Writing in 251 AD, Cyprian the Bishop of Carthage recorded a bizarre event that had the tangential historical effect of witnessing to the communion of a small child. He tells a story of a baby girl who had been fed meat sacrificed to idols by town authorities while her parents were escaping persecution. Upon recovering their daughter, the parents brought her to the Eucharist (she was too young to be able to talk) whence she promptly spat out the sacrament. Cyprian tells the story to illustrate how the lapsed have defiled themselves, but in the process allows us to see that offering communion to small children was an assumed practice, at least in 3rd century Carthage.⁵⁷

The next piece of hard evidence comes from Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, a century and a half later. Defending infant baptism, he says,

Now, if your hearts can bear that Christ is not Jesus to any of the baptized, I do not know how you can be acknowledged to have sound faith. They are infants, but they are made members of Him. They are infants, but they receive His sacraments. *They are infants, but they become partakers of His table*, so that they may have life.⁵⁸

These passing comments (and others by Augustine) assume the practice. They do not prove that it was in all congregations, or existent before the early to mid-3rd century, but after Augustine the historical testimony is fairly widespread. Historically it is enough that an anti-paedocommunionist such as Cornelius Venema must admit that “in the fourth and fifth centuries, paedocommunion became a normal practice of the church.”⁵⁹ In fact, the historical evidence that communion of children simply continued in the fourth century is stronger and more direct than the evidence that it sprang up as a new practice.⁶⁰⁶¹

⁵⁷ Cyprian, *On the Lapsed*, accessed at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/050703.htm>. Please note that Cyprian does not hold the infant morally liable; he is simply illustrating a point for the adults – lapsed believers have defiled themselves and should not be quickly admitted back to the Eucharist.

⁵⁸ Augustine, *Sermon 174*, quoted in B.B. Warfield, “Introductory Essay on Augustin and the Pelagian Controversy,” in *Saint Augustin: Anti-Pelagian Writings, Vol. 5*, ed. Philip Schaff (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1886), p. xxiii.

⁵⁹ Venema, 16.

⁶⁰ Cf. the analysis in Gallant, 108-121.

While this practice largely continued in the Church, it could be disrupted by the difficulty of applying the sacrament of chrismation (anointing with oil and laying on hands) to newly baptized infants. Lay people were allowed to baptize in emergencies, so infants were quickly given the first sacrament of baptism, but chrismation was the domain of bishops and was deemed requisite for receiving the Eucharist. In the East, the issue was typically solved when the bishop would consecrate the oil, and then allow a priest to apply it to infants and serve them a small drop of wine, or to soak a small bit of bread in the wine. These latter techniques of infant communion also occurred in the West for babies who were episcopally chrismated,⁶² but many bishops became removed from their flocks as the Church developed in the Middle Ages, and chrismation could not be applied to all Western infants.

In addition to this separation of baptism and chrismation, individual confession became tied to Eucharistic participation. First communion was gradually delayed to first confession.⁶³ It became natural to expect that a child would not take communion, or that a person would normally have a hearing with a priest before participating. Other factors likely include the rising doctrine of transubstantiation and concern for spilling or polluting the host.⁶⁴ Finally, the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 nailed the coffin on the already-declining practice of paedocommunion by withholding the wine from the laity (which was necessary for infants to partake, either in itself or to soak the bread) and requiring Christians to go to confession before receiving the sacrament.⁶⁵⁶⁶

⁶¹ The strongest historical evidence against paedocommunion consists of a difficult-to-interpret passage from Origen that is allegorical and possibly not relevant, and one from Clement of Alexandria (150-219 AD). Clement cites 1 Cor. 11:27 to the effect that “one’s own conscience is best for choosing accurately or shunning [the Eucharist]” (*Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, nd), 2:642). The passage in Clement’s *Stromata* appears to be speaking only about adults, so its application to the present debate may be limited. However, his quote of 1 Cor. 11:27 with reference to discerning moral worth requires response. It is worth noting that he thinks the best practice is to imitate the godly – which children of Christian parents clearly do.

⁶² For the means of medieval infant participation, cf. Charles Crawford, “Infant Communion: Past Tradition and Present Practice,” *Theological Studies* 31:1 (1970), 528.

⁶³ Eugene Brand, “Baptism and Communion of Infants: A Lutheran View,” in *Living Water, Sealing Spirit: Readings on Christian Initiation*, ed. Maxwell Johnson (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1995), 37.

⁶⁴ “Infants often were not completely successful in swallowing the host, and that raised questions of mind-blowing proportions for sacramental literalists.” Brand, 37.

⁶⁵ Gallant, 125-128. cf. Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 5:724; and Crawford, 529-531. Mark Searle notes that the changes were slow and not deliberate. The change in explicit policy was aided by a new understanding of chrismation/confirmation as a rite separate from baptism.

What made this change of direction thinkable, of course, was the new theology of confirmation as a distinct sacrament, which the early medieval theologians had elaborated in an effort to persuade parents to bring their children to the bishop for completion of their initiation. As it happens, the rationale for receiving the sacrament eventually became the rationale for delaying it until the age of seven....

Searle, “Infant Baptism Reconsidered,” in *Ancient Futures for Worship, Volume 2: Baptism and Confirmation*, ed. Mark Searle (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1987), 19-20.

⁶⁶ At the time, the directive was not against infant communion per se. But the tie between age of reason, first confession, and Eucharist quickly became justification for withholding the sacrament until the age of reason. Cf. Robert Taft, S.J., “Liturgy in the Life of the Church,” *Logos: A Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 40 (1999), 187-229.

The communion of infants dates at least to 251 AD, there is no history that it was debated in the early church, and it was widely attested from the fifth century forward. The practice remains in the Eastern Orthodox churches, but in the West, after flourishing for centuries, it declined by the High Middle Ages for a variety of reasons. Stronger theologies of delayed confirmation, private confession in regular spiritual life, and transubstantiation helped to make the change in practice a change in policy.⁶⁷

The historical evidence for the early practice of infant communion is strong, but not strong enough to prove anything in the first or second century, where records are scarce anyway. Furthermore, a more detailed study of chrismation in the early church would be needed to make further sense of these dynamics.

⁶⁷ Searle, 17-20; Crawford, 531-532.

Appendix B: A Resource for Churches

When should my child receive communion?

Any baptized child of Christian parents may receive communion in our church. We believe that these children are fully in God's family unless and until they walk away.

Anyone who is baptized is in the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13) and the apostle Paul says about communion, "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, *for we all partake of the one bread*" (1 Cor. 10:17). All baptized Christians who are seeking to follow Jesus are one body, so the bread is for all of us. Children are being disciplined by their Christian parents even if the children are not fully aware of it yet.

What about babies?

Baptized babies may receive the bread and/or wine. However, for practical reasons, most parents will wait until their baby is eating solids. The easiest way to do this is to give them a small piece of the bread (without crust) and dip it in the wine, which will make it easier to swallow.

What about the verse that says to examine ourselves? I can tell you that my son/daughter is not doing any examining while we wait for our turn.

1 Corinthians 11:28 says, "Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup." This section of Paul's letter to the church in Corinth deals with one of their many problems: some Christians seeking their own glory excluded other Christians from the sacrament. This is just the opposite of 1 Cor. 10:17, where we become one body by eating the one bread. Self-examination is commanded by Paul so that trouble-making Christians can see the pain they are causing and repent. Note: these are active dividers of the church, not small kids.

I'll be honest, my child just wants a snack.

We do not wait for our children to understand prayer before they pray, and likewise our children may take communion before they understand what is going on. Parents should work to encourage their kids to grow in their understanding rather than waiting for them to be Christians.

So how should parents talk about it?

With toddlers or pre-schoolers, talk about how Jesus feeds us and gives us everything we need. When we take the bread and wine, we are saying, "I need your help, Jesus."

With young adolescents (ages 5-10), we can talk more clearly about hurting Jesus when we sin, and how he is always ready to receive us when we turn back to him. In communion, we are coming (back) to Jesus. Not only that, but everyone who trusts Jesus is like one big family when we come forward to eat and drink. Jesus wants so much for people to come to his meal, to trust him and follow him. Jesus died and rose so we could all eat this together and be his family.

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