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Children at the Lord's Table?

Assessing the Case for
Paedocommunion

Cornelis P. Venema



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About the author . . .

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Preface

The sacrament of the Lord's Supper is a means of grace, which Christ is pleased to use by His Spirit to nourish the faith of believers and to strengthen their fellowship with Him and with those who are members of His body, the church. In recent years, a controversy has developed regarding the proper recipients of this sacrament. In a number of Reformed and Presbyterian churches, proponents of the admission of all children of believing parents to the sacrament have aggressively argued for a change in the practice of the churches. According to these proponents of what is known as "paedocommunion," the inclusion of such children in the covenant of grace requires that they be admitted to the Lord's Table. Failure to admit such children, in their judgment, constitutes a serious inconsistency in the covenant theology that undergirds the practice of the baptism of the children of believing parents.

This book examines the case for paedocommunion from historical, biblical, and confessional standpoints. Since the ultimate measure for the faith and practice of Christ's church is conformity to biblical teaching, the main focus and burden of the book is a careful examination of the scriptural teaching regarding the requirements for admission to the Lord's Supper. On the basis of this examination, the book concludes that the historic practice of the churches does conform to the teaching of Scripture and the advocacy of paedocommunion does not follow from a proper understanding of the covenant of grace.

Due to the importance of the covenant argument to the case for paedocommunion, I have appended to the book a chapter titled "Covenant Theology and Baptism." This chapter originally was published in *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism* (P&R Publishing, 2003), and is used with the permission of the publisher.

In accordance with the guidelines of Reformation Heritage Books, the Scripture quotations throughout are taken from the Authorized or King James Version of the Bible. However, the treat-

ment of scriptural passages that are relevant to the topic includes, wherever pertinent, a consideration of the original languages.

Since the available studies on the topic of the admission of children to the Lord's Table are largely written from a pro-paedocommunion perspective, this book is presented with the hope that it will fill a gap in the literature.

I am grateful to the staff members of Reformation Heritage Books for their interest in and willingness to make this book available to the public. I also wish to acknowledge the board of the Reformed Fellowship, the publishers of the periodical *The Outlook*, for which I wrote a series of articles on paedocommunion that forms the background for this book.

With gratitude to the Lord for the privilege of serving with them in the training of students for the ministry of Word and sacrament, I dedicate this book to my faculty colleagues at Mid-America Reformed Seminary.

—Cornelis P. Venema
August 2008

Introducing the Question: “Should the Children of Believers Be Admitted to the Lord’s Table?”

The way in which people formulate a question often betrays a bias. This is certainly true when it comes to the question of whether covenant children should be admitted to the Lord’s Table.

For instance, some years ago, an advocate of admitting children to the Lord’s Table responded to a book that defended the historic practice of the evangelical and Reformed churches. He titled his response, *Daddy, why was I excommunicated?*¹ That title gave new meaning to the expression “begging the question”! Of course, this author’s question was not really a question at all. It was an answer masquerading as a question. In the opinion of that author, the typical practice of Reformed churches amounted to an illegitimate exclusion of children from one of their rights and privileges as members of the covenant community.

It is important to acknowledge this feature of the debate over admitting children to the Lord’s Table. Contemporary proponents of what is often called “paedocommunion” frequently allege that the traditional view creates an artificial barrier to receiving children of believers at the Lord’s Supper. Whether this is true, however, depends on a more basic question: On what basis should *anyone* be admitted to the Lord’s Table?

A defender of the traditional view, which emphasizes the

1. Peter J. Leithart, *Daddy, why was I excommunicated?: An Examination of Leonard J. Coppes’ Daddy, May I Take Communion?* (Niceville, Fla.: Transfiguration Press, 1992). As its title indicates, Leithart’s book is a response to Leonard J. Coppes’ *Daddy, May I Take Communion? Paedocommunion vs. the Bible* (Thornton, Colo.: Leonard J. Coppes, 1988).

necessity of a public profession of faith prior to a believer's admission to the Table, could well argue that this position does not exclude covenant children. It actually excludes all people, children or adults, who are not qualified to come to the Table because they have not responded properly to the invitation extended to them.

The historic view does not deny that the children of the covenant are invited to the Lord's Table. As a matter of fact, if their baptism means anything, it means that they are invited to respond in faith to the Lord's gracious promise, which would qualify them to receive the sacrament that nourishes faith. Therefore, the only thing preventing such children, or any others, from coming to the Table is the absence of an appropriate response to the invitation. All believers who properly answer the "R.S.V.P." that accompanies the overtures of God's grace in Christ are welcome to come to the Lord's Table. When we look at the matter from this point of view, the question takes on a slightly different shading.

1.1 Clarifying Our Terms

The question being addressed is ambiguous for another reason. Not only could it subtly suggest that the traditional position inappropriately refuses children admission to the Lord's Table, it also leaves uncertain what is meant by "covenant children." In order to prepare for consideration of the subject of paedocommunion, therefore, it is necessary to clarify the terms that often are used in contemporary debates. It is surprising how often and quickly discussions of the issue become confused because of a failure to be clear about terms.

The inclusion of children at the Lord's Table is commonly referred to as "paedocommunion" (lit. "child Communion").² This language is used as shorthand for any position that argues for the admission of children to the sacrament of Holy Communion. Though a useful term, it does not distinguish adequately between two very different views of the children who are to be admitted to the Table. Some advocates of paedocommunion favor the admission of children to the Lord's Supper only at an earlier age than is customary among many Reformed churches (middle to

2. *Paedo* is a transliteration of the Greek term for "child" (cf. "pedagogy"). It need not refer to an infant child, but it certainly refers to children of a young age who have not reached the period of adolescence.

late adolescence). This so-called “soft” view admits younger covenant members who have made a simple but credible profession of the Christian faith. Other advocates of paedocommunion take a “strict” position, favoring the admission of any baptized child of believing parents who is physically able to receive the Communion elements. One of the confusing features of contemporary debates about paedocommunion is that advocates do not always spell out which of these views they are defending. Though these two views may seem very close, they are quite distinct and need to be treated as such.

Though there may be some differences in practice among advocates of the strict form of paedocommunion, the fundamental argument is that any member of the covenant community who has received the sign and seal of the covenant promise in his or her baptism ought to enjoy the privilege of being admitted to and nourished at the Table of the Lord. Consequently, some advocates of this strict sense of paedocommunion propose that we might better speak of “covenant Communion” than “paedocommunion.” They argue that just as the language of “infant” baptism may give rise to the false assumption that infants are baptized on some basis other than adults, so the language of “paedocommunion” could suggest a unique kind of participation by children in the Lord’s Supper. The point of paedocommunion, however, is that there is only one basis for admission to the Table of the Lord, namely, membership in the covenant community. Proponents say that all covenant members ought to receive the sacrament, which has the same meaning and benefit for all its recipients.

Some defenders of the historic Reformed position speak of “credocommunion” in distinction from “paedocommunion.” This term emphasizes that the Lord’s Supper is reserved for those who have publicly professed the Christian faith. Advocates of this view argue that because the sacrament is provided as a means to nourish and strengthen faith, it should be received by believers who have professed their faith before God and His people. The language of “credocommunion,” therefore, stresses the indispensability of a prior profession of faith before admission to the Table of the Lord.

Even though this language can be helpful, I am unwilling to concede that advocates of a strict paedocommunion position are entitled to ownership of the language of “covenant Communion.”

When advocates of a strict paedocommunion position apply this language to their view, they assume what needs to be proven: that the covenant demands the admission of all its members to the Table of the Lord, whether they have professed the Christian faith or not.

But what if the new covenant in Christ, which is to be administered according to the New Testament Word, requires that those who receive the sacrament of Holy Communion do so in a way that demands a prior profession of faith? Administering the sacraments of the new covenant in accord with the demands of the divinely authored Word of the covenant surely has as much right to be called a "covenant Communion" view as the alternative paedocommunion view. For this reason, the historic view of the Reformed churches might well be termed both a "covenant Communion" and a "credocommunion" view. To treat these terms as incompatible is another form of "begging the question."

I offer these comments not to make matters more difficult, but to achieve a measure of clarity regarding the precise question addressed in this book. It is not so much the question of the approximate age at which children of believing parents should profess their faith and thereupon be admitted to the Lord's Table. Though this question is an important one that is not easily answered, it is not the fundamental question. Indeed, it is not a question that, as we shall see, can be answered in a definitive manner. *The exact question to be addressed is: Does membership in the covenant, which is signified and sealed to the children of believing parents through their baptism, constitute a sufficient basis for admitting them to the Table of the Lord?* Thus, this discussion will not focus so much on the "soft" paedocommunion view, which is itself but a modification of the historic view of the Reformed churches (although encouraging children to profess their faith at an earlier age). The focus will be on the "strict" paedocommunion view, which claims that membership in the covenant is a sufficient basis for admission to the Table of the Lord.

1.2 The Principal Arguments for Paedocommunion

During the past several decades, remarkable attention has been given to paedocommunion by Reformed and Presbyterian churches. Often prompted by vigorous advocates of the paedocom-

munion position, many confessionally Reformed denominations have studied the biblical and historical dimensions of this issue. Though these denominations have not altered their historic practice, agitation for paedocommunion continues unabated in some quarters. The advocacy of paedocommunion seems to find its home especially among believers who are relatively recent converts from broad evangelicalism to a more specifically Reformed understanding. Among such converts, there is a keen interest in the Reformed view of the covenant and its implications for the life of the church and the calling of her members. This interest has spawned a number of calls for a more thoroughly covenantal view than has historically been the case in the Reformed churches. Advocacy of paedocommunion is a symptom of a broader desire to see the distinctives of Reformed covenantal theology worked out in a more thorough fashion.

To conclude this introduction to the debate over paedocommunion, it is necessary to identify briefly the principal arguments often cited by its advocates. An examination of the writings of paedocommunionists indicates that the arguments for paedocommunion are of four kinds.

1.2.1 *The historical argument*

The first argument for the paedocommunion view is a historical one. According to paedocommunionists, the admission of children to the sacrament of Holy Communion best conforms to the ancient practice of the church. The practice of paedocommunion was widespread in the early church and continues to be the practice of the Eastern Orthodox churches, which serve Communion to infants on the occasion of their baptism and thereafter. The occasion for its cessation in the Western church was the development of the doctrine of transubstantiation, which was formally codified at the Fourth Lateran Council in AD 1215.³ Because the doctrine of transubstantiation taught that the sacramental elements of bread and wine become the real body and blood of Christ, participation in the sacrament became a more fearful prospect for believers and

3. According to the doctrine of transubstantiation, when the priest consecrates the sacramental elements, a miracle occurs by which the elements are changed "substantially" into the real body and blood of Christ, though their "accidental" appearance remains the same.

their children. Concerns about infants or children desecrating the consecrated elements came to form an obstacle to their admission to the sacrament. The Reformation recovered a more biblical understanding of the sacrament, but it did not challenge the Western church's abandonment of the practice of paedocommunion.⁴

Reformed believers who advocate the practice of paedocommunion generally recognize that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, not the traditional practice of the church, finally determine the faith of the Christian church. Therefore, it is not enough to argue for paedocommunion from history. There must be clear biblical warrant for admitting children to the Lord's Table. In addition to the historical argument, therefore, proponents of paedocommunion appeal to three biblical arguments: the covenant argument, the Passover/Lord's Supper analogy, and the 1 Corinthians 11 argument.

1.2.2 *The covenant argument*

The first of these biblical arguments is really the linchpin of the case for paedocommunion. As noted above, many who favor paedocommunion insist that their position ought to be called "covenant Communion." They hold that all members of the new covenant community — believers and their children — ought to be admitted to the Table of the Lord. Furthermore, they argue that the prohibition against children of the covenant being admitted to the Table of the Lord amounts to a kind of backhanded "excommunication" and that it betrays a failure to rid the church's practice of a kind of "baptistic" thinking, which does not fully acknowledge the rights and privileges that belong to every member of the covenant community. If the sacramental practice of the Reformed churches is to measure up to its covenantal view, these proponents say, the children of believing parents, who have received the sign and seal of covenant membership in baptism, ought to be admitted to the Lord's Supper; otherwise, the "Baptist" argu-

4. Cf. Tim Gallant, *Feed My Lambs: Why the Lord's Table Should Be Restored to Covenant Children* (Grande Prairie, Alberta: Pactum Reformanda Publishing, 2002). Gallant's use of the term "restored" in his subtitle illustrates this argument from history on the part of some paedocommunionists. Gallant's study includes a useful selected bibliography of sources on the subject of paedocommunion.

ment that Reformed churches do not “practice what they preach” when they refuse children at the Table of the Lord is irrefutable. This argument holds that a consistent covenant position demands that all members of the covenant receive the privileges of the covenant. The Lord’s Supper, which the Lord instituted as a means of grace to confirm and strengthen those who are His members, is one such privilege that may not be withheld from the children of believing parents.

1.2.3 *The “analogy with the Passover” argument*

Lest it appear that the biblical argument for paedocommunion is simply a covenant argument that appeals to the broad implications of covenant membership and privilege, proponents of paedocommunion also appeal to the analogy between the Lord’s Supper and the Old Testament Passover (as well as other covenant meals). Since the Lord’s Supper was instituted on the occasion of the Passover as the new covenant fulfillment of the old covenant rite, proponents say the church should admit children to the Supper just as they were formerly admitted to the Passover. Lest we fall prey to a kind of “dispensationalistic” view of the discontinuity between the Old Testament and the New Testament, we should not withhold the privilege of admission to the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper from the children of believing parents. In the view of those who use this argument, the Reformed practice of prohibiting children from coming to the Table of the Lord represents an impoverishment of their circumstance when compared to the privileges that children enjoyed under the old covenant administration.

Moreover, proponents argue that we have an additional precedent for the inclusion of such children in the privilege of partaking of the Lord’s Supper in the Old Testament practice of sharing various covenant meals and sacrifices with the children of the covenant. Here, too, proponents say, the traditional practice of the Reformed churches opens them up to the charge of inconsistency. If Reformed churches may argue from the Old Testament practice of circumcision and the inclusion of children within the covenant to the New Testament practice of baptizing the children of believers, then they also may argue from this Old Testament practice regarding children’s participation in the Passover and

other covenant meals to the New Testament practice of admitting children to the Lord's Table.

1.2.4 *The 1 Corinthians 11 argument*

The last argument that advocates of paedocommunion often present is an interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11 that appeals to the historical occasion for its teaching about "worthy" participation in the Lord's Supper. In this passage, the apostle addresses the failure by the Corinthians to discern properly who belongs to the body of Christ or the church. By their factionalism and practice of discriminating between rich and poor, the Corinthian believers were contradicting the profound meaning of their common participation in Christ. As members of one body through faith in Christ, they were obliged to treat equally every member of the body. According to some paedocommunionists, this background for Paul's admonitions in 1 Corinthians 11 limits their application. The admonition to discern the body of the Lord, for example, is not a general rule that every participant in the Lord's Supper should have a proper understanding of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Rather, it is a specific charge to some believers in Corinth who were acting inappropriately in the context of the celebration of the Lord's Supper (and some believers today who may commit a similar offense). This specific charge does not apply in the case of children who have not committed a similar offense. It may even be the case that the historic Reformed practice of excluding children from the Table of the Lord represents a failure to discern the body or church in a manner that is similar to the practice Paul condemns. For these reasons, the traditional appeal to 1 Corinthians 11 against the practice of paedocommunion proves to be invalid in the eyes of paedocommunion proponents.

1.3 Summary

Each of these arguments will be considered at greater length in subsequent chapters. The order of these chapters will roughly reflect the sequence of these four arguments. Bearing in mind what has been defined as the focus of the question, the next chapter will consider the history of the Christian church's teaching and practice regarding the proper recipients of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. After a general survey of the historical prac-

tice of the Christian church in regard to the admission of children to the Lord's Table, the third chapter will focus on the confessions of the Reformation and their significance for the practice of paedocommunion. The largest section of this book will be devoted to a consideration of the biblical evidence that relates to the administration of the Lord's Supper, especially the requirements for the admission of members of the covenant community to the sacrament (chapters 4 and 5). Due to the importance of 1 Corinthians 11:17–34 to the debates regarding the propriety of admitting children to the Lord's Table, chapter 6 will be dedicated to a treatment of this passage. The concluding chapter will offer a summary of the biblical evidence for an evaluation of the argument for paedocommunion. The conclusion will also briefly consider a contemporary understanding of the covenant that often undergirds the advocacy of paedocommunion among some writers.

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