

THE PRACTICE OF PAEDOCOMMUNION

In recent years many churches have begun to permit baptized children who are not confirmed to receive the Lord's Supper. Such is the practice of our parish. In this article I want to provide some brief explanations as to why such a practice is permitted and encouraged.

- 1. It fits with the Old Testament observance of the Passover meal.** Those of us who baptize infants defend our position, in part, on the basis of the fact that the Lord brought infants into covenant relationship with Him through circumcision under the old covenant and that in like manner He now commands children to be brought into covenant relationship with Him in baptism in the new covenant. What is true for one sacrament ought to be good for the other. Clearly, children who ate solid foods were included in the Passover meal. In Exodus 12:4 the Israelites were commanded to take a lamb according to "the mouth of eating" and use it for the Passover meal. If you could eat you shared in the meal. There was no intellectual requirement. The sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper and their Old Testament types (circumcision and Passover) are sacraments of grace, not works. It was after eating the Passover meal for years that Israelite children would begin to ask questions about the meaning of that meal (Exodus 12:25-27). It was then that they were to be instructed about its meaning. The instruction came after admission to the Passover table – not before. What was true for the Passover should be true for the Supper. Children capable of eating solid food should be welcomed at the Lord's Table. After your children have been receiving the meal they will begin to ask questions which will provide further opportunity for instruction in the Faith.
- 2. It fits into the whole idea of covenant.** To baptize children and then forbid them access to the Supper creates an unbiblical half-way covenant. If children have been placed into covenant relationship with God, what reason is there for barring them from His table? To do so makes them a part of the covenant community – sort of. Cutting someone off from access to the sacrament of the Supper is a disciplinary act - excommunication. Why are children treated as though they are sinful and under the discipline of the church? There is no warrant to this action. In the Old Testament all members of the covenant community were permitted access to the Passover meal. What reason is there to change that in the New Testament? The new covenant is better and more expansive than the old covenant, not more restrictive.
- 3. Paedocommunion fits with the ideas of grace and mystery.** The most common objection to permitting children to the table is that they don't understand what is going on. This perspective errs in thinking that either a certain level of knowledge is necessary for salvation or that faith and knowledge are equivalent. Biblical faith is tied more to the act of trusting than it is to knowing. I have not met many children who doubted what their parents had told them about Jesus. In fact, the adults were exhorted by Jesus to have faith like theirs. Not to mention the fact that no adult knows exactly what goes on in the Supper – just ask 10 of them what is taking place and you'll probably get 10 different answers. The act of barring children from the

Table borders on Gnosticism. Gnostics believed that men were saved by a secret knowledge which they alone possessed. However, in truth there is an aspect of mystery in a sacrament that soars above human intellect. We are not saved by our knowledge – we are saved by God’s grace through faith. No human can fully comprehend what goes on in a sacrament. It is a sacrament of God’s grace – not human, intellectual ability.

4. Paedocommunion is consistent with St. Paul’s exhortations in 1 Corinthians 11, not at odds with them. Another common objection to permitting children at the Table of our Lord is that they are not able to examine themselves to avoid eating in an unworthy manner (1 Corinthians 11:27-29). Most often this exhortation is taken to mean that each person who receives the sacramental elements must examine themselves to see whether there is any sin which should prevent them from coming to the Lord’s Table. This logic errs on several accounts – only one of which I shall mention here. St. Paul’s exhortations, when taken in context, apply to a situation where the church (the body of Christ) was divided when it gathered for the Supper – some were gorging themselves and getting drunk while others went without food and drink. Paul is ashamed that they despised the church of God (v.22). The sin in Corinth was that the church body was not united, as it should have been, when it received the Supper. What was to be representative of the unity of God’s people was instead representing their disunity. That same sin is exactly what occurs when children are barred from communion. The covenant body of Christ is divided into the “haves” and the “have-nots”. Instead of saying, “you don’t have enough money – you can’t participate” we say “you don’t have enough intellect – you can’t participate.” When Paul says in v.29 that the Lord’s body must be discerned, he is not only talking about seeing Jesus’ presence in the Supper, he is also referring to acknowledging the unity of the church – the body of Christ. It is for this reason that permitting children at the Table follows St. Paul’s message to the church in Corinth, whereas preventing them violates that same message.

This is just a brief collection of thoughts regarding this topic. Suffice it to say that the admission of covenant children to the table of our Lord is, I believe, a practice most pleasing to the Lord which will bear fruit for His kingdom.