

## COVENANT COMMUNION: IT'S FOR THE CHILDREN DEFINING THE ISSUE<sup>1</sup>

One characteristic of our particular Church and denomination within the Christian Church is that we baptize infants. For this reason we are said to be *paedobaptists*. This word comes from two Greek words, *paidion*, child, and *baptismos*, baptism. Though I know of no one who makes the mistake of believing that we baptize *only* infants, this word is somewhat of mischaracterization of our views. Certainly we do believe in baptizing the infants of believers because, as is clear from the Scripture, the promise of God is unto us and to our children. God promised to be a God to us and to our children, so he counts them as his people, marking them out with the sign of baptism. Our Confessional documents<sup>2</sup> make it clear that we are to baptize the infants of believers. WLC 166 “*Unto whom is baptism to be administered?* A. Baptism is not to be administered to any that are out of the visible church, and so strangers from the covenant of promise, till they profess their faith in Christ, and obedience to him, but infants descended from parents, either both or but one of them professing faith in Christ, and obedience to him, are, in that respect, within the covenant, and to be baptized.” Yes, certainly it is true that we baptize our children. But we also baptize adults as well. While *paedobaptism* is an accurate description of one particular practice of Reformed churches, it does not take into account that we baptize adolescents and adults also. For this reason I believe if we had to put an adjective with baptism at all, it would be better to understand it as *covenant baptism* (which is somewhat redundant in biblical language). All people—whether aged or infant—receive formal initiation into God’s covenant family through the rite of baptism.

The Reformed branch of the Church has long defended the practice of baptizing her children. But what about the next logical question that arises: “What about the participation of our children in the covenant meal, the Lord’s Supper? Does baptism alone qualify them for this family meal, or must something else be done for them to be qualified to eat at their Lord’s Table?” The early church (whether Old Covenant or early New Covenant) did not seem to even ask this question. It was assumed that the children of the covenant participated in the covenant meals (as we will see). Within the past eight hundred years or so, the Church in the West (Roman Catholics and Protestants following in the Reformation) have excluded children from the Lord’s Table. And though many, especially Protestants, believe that there are Scriptural reasons for excluding children from the Table until they go through some type of “confirmation,” I believe that the weight of Scriptural evidence tips the scale overwhelmingly to the side of our children participating at the Table of the Lord when they are able to eat solid food. It is this that I will seek to show you from the Scriptures and the weight of the practice of the church in our history.

From the beginning of this apology for our children being included in Communion, I

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<sup>1</sup>This essay is a compilation of a series of lessons I taught at Community Presbyterian Church, Louisville, KY in 2006. As the reader will realize, I am writing within the context of being a minister in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). While there is much in the essay that applies to churches of all denominations, there are some particulars about my/our church situation that needed to be addressed. I hope that the reader can bear with those particulars in order to understand the broader issues of covenant communion.

Also, while I give credit occasionally to certain authors, I do not do so extensively. There are many to whom credit should be given, for I owe many a great debt. But much of this is a compilation of what I learned from many sources and re-worked for this series of lessons.

<sup>2</sup>Our Confessional documents are the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (WCF), the *Westminster Larger Catechism* (WLC), and the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* (WSC). They are also referred to as our “Standards.”

want the reader to understand that our denomination recognizes what I am about to teach as an *exception* to our Standards. That is, our denomination has ruled that if a minister believes what I believe about communing children—*paedocommunion*—he must state that before his examining presbytery. The presbytery must then approve or disapprove of his being accepted. If the presbytery believes that an exception to the Standards does not strike at the vitals of our system of doctrine, then they will receive the minister into the presbytery. Both presbyteries of which I have been a member have accepted me with this exception to our Standards. Though not a majority opinion, Reformed denominations recognize that there are valid arguments that can be made. Both the Presbyterian Church in America and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church formed committees to study the issue and presented reports to their respective bodies in 1988.<sup>3</sup> Though in the minority, both denominations have a large number of ministers who take this exception.

Within our churches there are some genuine disagreements about the subject as well as some misunderstandings. I hope to engage both, but I want to make sure that the misunderstandings are cleared up. My prayer is that the reader will think through this crucial subject biblically. We may disagree at the end of the day. But we will all be better for it if we engage in the process of thinking about through it.

## DEFINING TERMS

### *Paedocommunion*

As with the term *paedobaptism*, I am not completely satisfied with the term *paedocommunion* (i.e., child communion). The phrase *covenant communion* (if we had to have a phrase instead of simply saying *communion*) better fits what I am talking about here when speaking of bringing our children to the Table. As Tim Gallant says in his book *Feed My Lambs*, “*Covenant communion* is also more precise in that it defines the *terms* in which a child would partake of the Lord’s Supper. That is, the child is not communed *because* he is a child, nor yet by virtue of a self-conscious profession of faith, but because he is a member of the covenant.” (21) The word *paedocommunion* tends to segregate our children from the rest of the people of God as if they were in some other category (which many people believe that they are). The word, in some ways, prejudices the hearer to think of children in terms other than their covenant standing. Nevertheless, because *paedocommunion* is the conventional term that is used to distinguish this issue among many other issues, I am happy to use it for the purposes of discussion. But again, I believe that *covenant communion* would better reflect the entire debate because the debate is, “What qualifies the people of God admittance to His Table?” Having declared in baptism that our children are members of the people of God, the question is, “Why are they not to be included at the Lord’s Table if it is for the people of God?”

*Paedocommunion* is the admission of our children to the Lord’s Table by virtue of their membership in God’s covenant community, which is indicated by their baptism. Paedocommunion requires no *added* formal admission ceremony by the pastor and elders; that is, no examination and articulation of a profession of faith are needed. Baptism qualifies. Period. This stands over against the practice of many (note: not all) who admit children to the Lord’s Table only when they have had a “conversion experience” and make a “profession of faith.” Like

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<sup>3</sup>The PCA Report can be found here: <http://www.pcahistory.org/pca/2-498.pdf>. The OPC Report can be found here: <http://www.opc.org/GA/paedocommunion.html>.

adults coming in from outside of the church, children must make this profession of faith and then they may be brought to the Table (that is, if the profession of faith is deemed acceptable to the ruling body). This is our present practice in the PCA, and, thus, *our practice as a Session*. Even though I take exception to our Standards at this point, this cannot—and *is not*—implemented in our church. Our Book of Church Order (BCO) doesn't have any arbitrary minimum age set for admittance to the Table. The “credible profession of faith” is left up to the judgment of the pastor and elders of each church. “Young child communion” is not the same thing as paedocommunion. Paedocommunion is distinguished from *credo-communion*. Credo-communion means that a person must be able to articulate his faith as a requirement for admittance to the Table. That is what the PCA practices. A child might be admitted to the Table at a young age in a PCA church, but he must first make what the pastor and elders deem a “credible profession of faith.” This time of passing judgment upon a child's profession is called a few different names by different communions. This can be called “confirmation,” “profession of faith,” or some even say it is “getting saved.” At this time, interestingly enough, people tend to think that *this* is the time they become members of the church. When this practice is in place, baptism is divested of its significance as being the initiatory rite into the church (the place the Bible gives it). It is no wonder that many see baptism as nothing more than a wet dedication! Those who believe that our children should be communing on the basis of their membership in the church through baptism believe that God has already graciously adopted our children, and, therefore, they are simply to grow up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord throughout their lives. These children should, along with David and all the people of God who sang his Psalms, have the testimony that they knew the Lord from their mothers' breasts and that Jesus has been their Lord from their mothers' wombs (Ps 22.9-10). Therefore, many of our covenant children **will not** and **should not** have an experience like those coming out of lifestyles steeped in rebellion. Their parents will teach them from the earliest days that *their* God has claim on their lives and that all of their lives are to be lived in continual faith and repentance toward God as God's children. (Note that: understanding membership in the covenant does not promote presumption but faith and repentance.) While even those who do not believe in paedocommunion will hold to this in principle, the inconsistency between principle and practice is glaring (and, I believe, troubling).

### ***Child***

I must take the time to define the term “child” because of some of the differences even among those who hold to paedocommunion. As was the case with the Old Covenant meals, the child participated whenever he was able to eat solid food (and this was before he was able to articulate his faith). There was no set age at which this occurred. The age of weaning during the time of the Old Covenant was approximately three years of age, but this did not mean that children nursed exclusively until the age of three. Children participated in the covenant meals even before they could talk, which a three-year-old is well able to do normally. (Having had several three-year-olds, many times they are speaking well before that age.)

A child that is able to participate in the meal is one, who in the natural progression of life, begins to be able to handle solid food. This differs from “infant communion” in which infants are given wine or the bread dipped in wine (a practice called *intinction*). This is **not** what I am advocating.

A child who is included among God's people has his entire life defined by his covenant standing. That is, he is defined by what God declares concerning him *not what he has declared*

*about God.* As he grows, he grows a child of the covenant. He knows no other life. As he matures physically, he is maturing, not simply as a “natural child” who has a separate “spiritual life.” But he is maturing as a person who is a part of God’s gracious covenant. As he matures enough to begin to eat with his family at their household table, he is maturing enough to eat with *his family*, the Church, at the Table of *the* household. Life is not compartmentalized for the child growing in covenant. He does not have a secular life and a spiritual life. His life is lived “naturally” growing up in Christ and being nourished by his Savior from before he can consciously remember ... both in his immediate family household and in the house of his God.

### ***Non-communing members of the church***

Standing opposite of what I have just described to you is the understanding of children as non-communing members of the church. These children may be able to eat at home, but they are not allowed to eat with the rest of the church family because they cannot yet articulate their faith. I will be real careful at this point because “non-communing member” is a term used by our Constitution, the Book of Church Order (hereafter: BCO). I respect our authority and will not vindictively or dishonorably speak against it. But honoring our authorities does not mean that we cannot respectfully disagree with them.

A non-communing member is a person—whether aged or infant—who has been baptized but is not yet admitted to the Lord’s Table because of a lack of a credible profession of faith. (This can also occur as one of our disciplinary censures, but that is another matter.) This category seems to have been created to fit a particular view of children in the covenant. Children of believers are united to the church in baptism but are not “full” members. Our BCO exhorts: “[The church] also should encourage them, on coming to years of discretion, to make confession of the Lord Jesus Christ and to enter upon all privileges of *full church membership*.” (BCO 28-3) This means that we as Presbyterians do not believe our children to be “full members.”

The major problem I have with this is that I never see “half-member” status in Scripture. On this one issue, even our Baptist brothers are consistent in realizing that a person who is baptized should be admitted to the Lord’s Table. This is one of the inconsistencies Baptist consistently and rightly point out with those who believe in infant baptism but do not commune those who have been baptized.

Those who hold to paedocommunion do not believe that there is any reason to excommunicate our children, unless or until they have done something worthy of excommunication. The response to this is, “We have not excommunicated our children. Not allowing them to the Table is *not* excommunication.” The Scriptural logic here is quite flawed. What is the Table? It is the place where the communion of the church with Christ and with one another is expressed. What does Paul say in 1 Corinthians 10.16? The cup is *communion* with the blood of Christ. The bread is *communion* with the body of Christ. What is it when a person is not allowed to eat the bread and drink the cup? It is to be put outside of communion, or to be excommunicated. Barring someone from the Table means that the person has no part with Christ or the church (e.g., someone outside of the covenant). It can also mean that a person who was once participated in the Table no longer participates because of impenitance. If a person is a non-communing member, you are saying, in a way that has been said historically, God has a half-way covenant. That is, a person can be joined to Christ in his church but is not required or privileged to commune with him. The reasoning for this isn’t consistent.

## THE HISTORICAL CONTROVERSY OVER PAEDOCOMMUNION

Approximately 40 years ago this issue of communing covenant children *re*-surfaced in Presbyterian and Reformed circles. An article written by Christian Keidel in 1975 in the Westminster Theological Journal sparked renewed debate about what the church should be doing with regard to our children and communion. This was a renewal of an old issue within the larger church in the West. Somewhere around the year 900, a view of the Supper started gaining traction in the Western Church. That view is known as *transubstantiation*. This is the belief that the bread and wine literally become the physical body and blood of Jesus. With the introduction of a superstitious view of the sacrament the church began to worry about children spilling the “blood of Christ” or desecrating the “body of Christ” in some way. But it was not only children. This type of thinking led to the taking away of the elements from *all* the worshipers except the officiating priest. The Hussites (disciples of John Huss, pre-dating the Reformation) sought to restore the cup to the laity and restore communion to the church’s children. But the church refused to do so.

So this is not a new issue. This is an old issue re-visited. (Something, by the way, that has not had to be done in the Eastern branch of the Church will still practices paedocommunion.) But the issue is now being resurrected. As I mentioned earlier, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) as well as the PCA have declared paedocommunion to be an exception to our Standards, but there are many within both denominations who embrace this position and have stated their exceptions to their respective presbyteries. In fact, the majority opinion of the study committee for the OPC was *pro* paedocommunion at the completion of the study.

People are passionate on both sides of this issue. Both believe they are defending what the Bible teaches. Our Standards certainly do not give a ringing endorsement for paedocommunion, but it must also be said that the issue is only addressed in an inferential way in one particular question in the Larger Catechism: Q 177. There it speaks about having come to “years of discretion.” It never deals with the issue head-on. But our denomination has declared that this is enough to make it an exception to our Standards. When examined, if an ordinand holds to paedocommunion he must declare this to be an exception. Then the ruling body must determine whether or not he can be ordained (or transferred) in our denomination. Since these studies and rulings back in the 1980’s, many presbyteries have allowed the exception.<sup>4</sup>

Now, with that said, this issue must not be approached lightly or in some kind of maddened frenzy. When we disagree with what our Reformed fathers have said for the last 400 to 500 years (not univocally, to be sure, but in the majority), there must be great caution. But even our Confession makes it plain that the Confession is not infallible (i.e., beyond the capability of error). It can be wrong and thus corrected (cf. Ch. 1, *Of The Holy Scripture*). In fact, the American version of the Westminster Confession of Faith is different from the original version, having been corrected in certain areas dealing with the jurisdiction of the civil magistrate. We cannot take the Standards lightly, and we should not disagree with them unless an issue has been thoroughly studied. But the Standards, as good as they are, are not the Scriptures themselves (as they themselves state to be the case). Because of this, when we do find areas in need of reform in the Standards and, thus, in the Church, we should seek to change the things

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<sup>4</sup>I have been allowed to hold this exception in two presbyteries with the PCA. Both presbyteries made it clear that in allowing the exception I am able to teach my position because they cannot bind my conscience on the issue, especially since they allow the exception.

needed in the time and manner given to us. There has been, is, and will be controversy over this issue in the church. We need to walk carefully as we examine this issue, asking for God's grace to correct our errors, giving clearness of mind as we think through these issues, and living in peace with those with whom we disagree.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ISSUE IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

While this issue doesn't rise to the level of the doctrine of the deity of Christ, it is, nevertheless, an important issue. There are several interrelated factors. First, there is the issue of *how we view God's covenant*. Our practice reflects what we believe, and what we believe is reflected in what we do. The question is, "What are we saying about God's covenant when we deny our children access to the Table?" An important question indeed. If baptism is, as the Bible indicates, *the* formal initiation into God's covenant (and our Standards do reflect this as well), and communion is where we are nourished in the covenant, we are saying that God has children that he does not feed ... something he flatly forbids of human parents (cf. 1 Tim 5.8)! It is inescapable that we mar the grace of God by denying our children access to the Table.

Another related issue concern *how we view our baptized children*. When we view them as only "half-way" in the covenant, we have the tendency to turn from nurturing them within the covenant, teaching them to live by faith, to treating them as second-class members at best and outsiders at worst. We turn from accepting the grace of God's covenant as He Himself has declared it, actually believing His promise for our children, to some type of 19<sup>th</sup> century revivalism which presses for a dramatic "decision for Christ." Within the covenant, part of our nurturing of our children is administering to them the means of grace that God has given to us. We teach them the Word. We teach them to pray and pray with them and for them. And, we should administer to them the Lord's Supper so that they might grow in the grace and knowledge of their Lord.

A third interrelated issue is *how our children view God and his covenant*. We can say what we want to our children about their inclusion in the covenant through baptism, but they know that when the bread and wine are passed and they are passed by, they are not included with the rest of the church. If you were to tell your children consistently, "We love you and you are a part of the family, but you can't eat at the family table until you are able to talk well enough to articulate your understanding of the digestive process and the dynamics of the family relationship," your children would not only become frustrated, they would not believe they were really a part of the family. Talk about provoking your children to anger! In this respect I believe small children understand the Supper better than many adults. They don't have superstitious views of the Supper ... and rightly so. When the bread and wine are passed at our church meal—the family meal—and the children are excluded, they are being told, "You are not a part of us until you are smart enough to talk and express your faith." And, "If you have some deficiency so that you will never be able to talk or express your faith, you will never be included in the family meal." What are we telling our children about God and his covenant? We are telling them that God will not really accept them as family members until they are smart enough. He will not give them basic means of sustenance they are able to explain it. We are telling them that admittance to the Table is something they earn, not something gracious given to them by their heavenly Father for which they simply return thanks. The logic between practice and principle is irrefutable.

Yet another issue is tied to the practice or non-practice of paedocommunion: *how the*

*church is defined.* One basic question here: How many loaves does Paul say there are in 1 Corinthians 10:16-17? Is there one church of which people are members, or is there some kind of second-class membership? When you introduce something that is not biblical, the Bible's plain teaching does not make much sense. If by baptism children are members of the church, then they are *members of the church*. And again, if they are not viewed as members of the church by virtue of the biblical rite of baptism, then baptism becomes no more than a wet dedication. While different offices and stations in life are acknowledged in Scripture, there is no such category as "partial member."

Another issue that can cause confusion with the rejection of paedocommunion is *how we handle discipline in the church*. If we have non-communicating members—and our BCO has an entire section on *Discipline of Non-communicating Members* (ch. 28)—what do you do with a non-communicating member who fails to repent? Cut him off from something he has never had? How do we exercise discipline of "full members?" Well, if they refuse to repent, we cut them off from the Table as the last ditch effort to restore them. It is the Table that is the focal point of discipline. A session can warn erring baptized, non-communicating members, but there is no real consequence to their actions because they are already excommunicated.

In all these things I want you to notice that this is not simply an issue with which parents of young children must wrestle. This issue reaches to some major view within the doctrine of the entire life of the church. Again, this is why we should approach it with caution. But this is also why this issue should be approached with resolve when we discover the biblical correctness of the view. The issue is important to more than just those who have small children. It is important to the entire church.

## **REFORMATION IS THE AIM OF TEACHING ON PAEDOCOMMUNION**

Since I am in a denomination that does not allow the practice of paedocommunion, why even bring this up? Reformation. Whenever we find places in our doctrine and practice that need to be re-examined and changed because the Scriptures move us this way, we have a responsibility to take a fresh look at the issue. I pray that the reader's thinking will change about how he views the church's smallest members. I also pray that the Western Church as a whole will re-examine this issue and will change. While we need to give deference and general respect to our brothers who disagree, that does not mean that we have the obligation to sit by quietly and hold our positions to ourselves. We, along with many in the church through the millennia, should call the church to reform its doctrines and practices in this area so that these branches of the church may be the church God has called us to be.

## **COVENANT COMMUNION: COVENANT CHILDREN AND THE PASSOVER EXODUS 12.1-28**

As we study the issue of covenant communion, we must realize that many things are at stake. (No, I am not saying that the gospel is at stake. People who don't hold to paedocommunion still believe the gospel. But there are many gospel issues involved; i.e., the nature of the gospel promise, to whom those promises are made, etc.) PCA minister Peter Leithart emphasizes some of these matters in his essay, *Daddy, Why Was I Excommunicated?* (this was in answer to Leonard Coppes small book, *Daddy, May I Take Communion?*):

The paedocommunion debate raises questions not only concerning the character of the sacraments and the relationship of the two sacraments [i.e., baptism and the Supper], but also touches on such major areas of theology as the doctrine of the Church, the meaning of the covenant, the relationship of the covenant to eternal election, the doctrines of perseverance and assurance, the relationship of faith and the sacraments, the relationship of faith and understanding, the relationship of faith and works, and other questions of great theological significance. Hermeneutical questions, including the meta-issue of relating the OT and NT, are also implicated. For these reasons, in the PCA, where many have a less than Scriptural view of baptism, paedocommunion is rightly seen as a profound challenge to the prevailing thought and practice. If true, paedocommunion requires the contemporary Reformed churches to undergo a far-reaching theological repentance.

As Leithart mentions, the way in which we view the Scriptures is not only foundational for the issue but is also affected by our views of this issue. We in the Reformed community emphasize strongly (at points) the essential continuity of the Old Testament (OT) and the New Testament (NT) so that *all* Scripture is profitable concerning us for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness. We are not “NT Christians,” in one sense. Rather we are “whole-Bible Christians.” This approach of interpreting the Scriptures has a tremendous impact not only for the issue of paedobaptism (covenant baptism) and paedocommunion (covenant communion) but also for many other aspects of faith and practice as well.

I want to single out the continuity issue between the OT and the NT in this section of the paper. This issue becomes a major lynch-pin in defense of paedocommunion. More particularly the participation of children within the covenant meals of the people of God is of vital importance for those of us who believe that these principles carry over into the new and better covenant, where privileges are greater, not less. It is with this foundational interpretive principle in mind that we look at the topic of covenant children and the Passover.

The inclusion of children in the Passover sacrificial meal has been a central issue in the debate over paedocommunion. Because of the *prima facie* connection between the Lord’s Supper and the Passover, many have said that whether or not children were included in this covenant meal is *the* determinative factor. If children were included in the Passover celebration, there is a strong argument for their inclusion within the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. If children were not included in the Passover, then there is a strong argument against their inclusion in the Lord’s Supper. Because the Passover-Lord’s Supper connection has taken such a prominent place in the discussion, I want to take the time to deal with the arguments.

While I agree that there is a strong continuity between the Passover and the Lord’s Supper, this is not the only connection that needs to be made with old creation meals. Passover, though extremely important, is not the only ground for arguing the inclusion of children within the celebration of covenant meals. Passover, granted, was the feast of feasts, the feast that was foundational to all other feasts in Israel. BUT, Passover was not the *only* sacrificial/covenant meal. The Lord’s Supper incorporates and is continuous with, not only the Passover, but with *all* the OC feasts. The reason for this is that all OC feasts typified Christ. All sacrifices and corresponding feasts are summed up and find their consummation in him. If this is true (and I believe that it can hardly be argued), then the Supper that he gives us in which he gives us himself must bring to consummation all of those feasts. Therefore, if the children were included in *any* of the covenant meals (which is undeniable as we will see), then there are Scriptural



grounds for their inclusion in the Lord's Supper. (There are, of course, grounds for the inclusion of children in the Supper in the NC. But we will focus on the OC foundation for now.)

So, even if children were not included in Passover, there would still be grounds for their inclusion in the NC meal. But, if children *were* included in the original and allowed to come to subsequent Passover meals, then the argument becomes all the more strong. It is for this reason that many people who argue against paedocommunion will begin by trying to prove that children were not included in the Passover celebration(s). For instance, Kenneth Gentry goes to great lengths to prove that children were *not* included in the Passover.<sup>5</sup> (He is one of the more well-known and vocal advocates against paedocommunion. His arguments against the practice are probably the best out there. I will be focusing on and seeking to refute those arguments. Interestingly, one anti-paedocommunionist, Louis Berkhof, didn't even argue the case about children's inclusion in the Passover. In his *Systematic Theology* he readily concedes the fact that they were included in the Passover, but, he says, they are not to be included in the Lord's Supper.)

### THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE ORIGINAL PASSOVER

The prescriptions for the original Passover (and, as we will see, subsequent Passovers as well) are found in Exodus 12. There are several salient points that are to be made from the original prescriptions concerning those who participated in the original Passover. First, *household or family language is prominent throughout this discourse*. We read in 12.3 that each man is to take a lamb "according to the house of his father, a lamb for a household." If the household is too small to consume an entire lamb, then they and their neighbors are to share a lamb, literally, "according to the mouth of his eating" (12.4; a phrase we shall visit in a moment). Moses gives the commands concerning the Passover to the elders of Israel and he recounts that they are to take lambs "according to your families" (12.21).

There are no fine distinctions made between what members of the family are allowed and not allowed to eat of the Passover meal. Although this is a distinctive meal within the life of the people of God, the meal is for the people of God who will participate in the Exodus. The meal was to be according to their household or their families. The people within the household that could eat were to eat this meal. This is the most natural reading of the account and is borne out with many other evidences.

It is interesting to me that as Reformed folks we are quick to use "household" and/or familial language to prove the continuing validity of the membership of children in the church—i.e., paedobaptism—but we turn into Baptists again when it comes to speaking about covenant meals. Indeed, as I believe Keidel pointed out in his article almost 40 years ago, the same line of argument is used against paedocommunion by the Reformed as is used against paedobaptism by the Baptists. The household means the household. No doubt there was a limitation to those who could actually eat the meal (as I think will be made clear), but everyone who could eat in the household was to participate in this meal.

The prescriptions are clear: the meal was to be for *every eating mouth*. The phrase "every man according to his eating" (AV), "according to each man's need" (NKJ), "according to what

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<sup>5</sup>If the reader is interested in hearing Dr. Gentry's arguments, you may order his audio lessons at [http://www.kennethgentry.com/search.php?search\\_query=paedocommunion&x=0&y=0](http://www.kennethgentry.com/search.php?search_query=paedocommunion&x=0&y=0). Since this essay arose out of a series of lessons for my congregation, I did not cite specific places within his lectures.

each man should eat” (NASB) is literally “the mouth of his eating.” The significance of this phrase is that it is used only three other times in the OT: Ex 16.16, 18, 21. Each one of these other occurrences is dealing with the children of Israel and their collection and eating of the manna in the wilderness. The fact that this was the only food that was available for any person eating solid food among the people of God in the wilderness is a strong case for the fact that the idea captured in this phrase is that it means that all those who eat solid food within a household are included. Manna was to be gathered according to the number of mouths that had to be fed. This is essentially what the phrase means. The most natural reading of the text in the Passover account is the same as with the collection and consumption of the manna: every eating mouth in the household is to be accounted for and provided for in the meal.

We also notice in Exodus 12 that *all of the congregation was to participate in the original Passover*. The regulations for subsequent Passover celebrations were given to Moses at the time of the original Passover. We find in Exodus 12.47 that *all the congregation of Israel shall keep it*. This was for future observances to be sure, but it is certainly true of the first occurrence as well.

The answer that anti-paedocommunionists like Gentry give to this is that “congregation” does not always speak about every single person within Israel but sometimes only refers to the elders of Israel. This is true. For instance, Moses is commanded to speak to “all the congregation of Israel” in 12.3, but we find that he speaks to “all the elders of Israel” in 12.21. (Of course, Moses accomplishes the full task *through* the elders because every household–roof for roof–heard Moses through the elders.)

The context is always to determine the meaning of terms. And there are times also when “all the congregation of Israel” means every single member in Israel, head-for-head. For instance, someone who has leaven in his house during the Feast of Unleavened Bread is to be “cut off from the congregation of Israel (Ex 12.19). The person is not only cut off from the elders or a particular element of the community. The person is cut off from the whole community. The journeys of God’s people also call the whole of God’s people “the congregation of Israel” (Ex 16.1; 17.1). This is not just the elders of just the men but every single person. For covenant feasts such as the Passover, all of the people of God who enjoyed God’s deliverance from Egypt were to participate in the meal.

This definition of God’s people in relation to their participation in covenant feasts is seen quite clearly in the events leading up to the Passover and Exodus. When Moses approached Pharaoh about letting God’s people go, he first asked if they could go into the wilderness to sacrifice and celebrate a feast unto the Lord (Ex 5.1). We read in Ex 10.9: And Moses said, “We will go with our young and our old; *with our sons and our daughters*, with our flocks and our herds we will go, *for we must hold a feast to YHWH*.” According to 10.25 the flocks and herds were for sacrifice. But the children were to go with them to celebrate the feast *to YHWH*; i.e., this was worship. This is not merely, “We want our children to be included in our annual picnic.” Pharaoh refuses this request and specifically says that the little ones cannot go. The men could go, but the little ones would not be allowed to go (10.11). The response to this is that if we can’t take the little ones, then we are not being obedient. All the people of God are to be at the covenant feast. Pharaoh would not allow them to celebrate a feast unto YHWH, so YHWH made sure His people would celebrate a feast to Him. That is where the Passover entered the picture.

What is important to see here is that the congregation could not be defined without the little ones. When the people of God celebrated a feast to YHWH, the little ones *must* be included. The whole congregation was defined by God through the prophet Joel (who was calling for a

fast) as the elders, the children and nursing infants, brides and bridegrooms and the priests (cf. Joel 2.15-17). When the covenant renewal ceremony took place in Moab as recorded for us in Deuteronomy 29, we see with whom the covenant was renewed; i.e., who was considered to be a part of the congregation:

All of you stand today before YHWH your God: your leaders and your tribes and your elders and your officers, all the men of Israel, your little ones and your wives -- also the stranger who *is* in your camp, from the one who cuts your wood to the one who draws your water -- that you may enter into covenant with YHWH your God, and into his oath, which YHWH your God makes with you today, that he may establish you today as a people for himself, and *that* he may be God to you, just as he has spoken to you, and just as he has sworn to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. (Dt 29.10-13)

The covenant is not made or *renewed* with mature believers only, but also with *the little ones*. Not so incidentally, when covenant meals were eaten as memorials (which the Passover was), the covenant was being renewed. (This is true for more than just the Passover.)

What conclusion must we draw from this? All of the congregation of Israel, which included the little ones, participated in the original Passover.

This may have been true in the original Passover, but was it true in subsequent Passovers as the situation for Israel changed drastically as they conquered the Promised Land. Some who believe that children were barred from participation in the original Passover, also believe that children were barred from the subsequent Passover celebrations as well. This isn't the case.

#### **PARTICIPANTS IN SUBSEQUENT PASSOVER CELEBRATIONS**

***All types of participants in the original Passover were allowed to participate in subsequent Passovers.***

In the original giving of the prescriptions for observing the Passover throughout their generations, God provided for the bringing in of the nations. The males who were not a part of Israel had to be circumcised like all the other males in Israel, but that was the only requirement to participate (cf. 12.43ff.). It was understood that Israel was to be defined in the same way in future generations as it was at the time of the original Passover: there were those in this covenant community and those outside this covenant community as would be indicated by the sign of the covenant, circumcision. Participation in the Passover meal was defined by membership within the covenant, not some extra condition concerning their reasoning ability, maturity, and/or eloquence within the covenant.

Objection is raised at this point based on what is prescribed in Deuteronomy 16 concerning the participants in the covenant feasts after the centralization of worship would take place in the Promised Land. In summary concerning all three feasts we hear this: "Three times a year all your males shall appear before YHWH your God in the place which He chooses: at the Feast of Unleavened Bread, at the Feast of Weeks, and at the Feast of Tabernacles; and they shall not appear before YHWH empty-handed." (Dt 16.16) That is, after God establishes a central location for worship—i.e., the Tabernacle and/or Temple—it would be required of all males to make the journey to that place in order to observe these three major feasts.

What some have a problem with here is distinguishing between what is *required* and what is *allowed*. You will hear it said that only the adult male were allowed to the Passover. But this is

not what the text teaches. “All your males” does refer to those who were mature. The age a male became an “official” adult was 20. This was the time he was registered so that he could go to war (cf. Num 1.3 *passim*). Twenty-year old males were required to pay the ransom to the Lord (Ex 30.14). It was only those who were twenty-years old and upward that were numbered in the censuses taken in Israel (Ex 38.26).

It is granted that this is what this means. But the question is: Does the fact that some in Israel are *required* to attend the Feasts mean that the others in Israel are *not allowed* or *forbidden* to participate in the feasts? If we keep reading in these prescriptions concerning the Feasts, we discover that although the adult males were required to attend the Feasts, the rest of the family was allowed (encouraged?) to participate. Here are the words concerning the Feast of Weeks:

You shall rejoice before YHWH your God, you and your son and your daughter, your male servant and your female servant, the Levite who *is* within your gates, the stranger and the fatherless and the widow who *are* among you, at the place where YHWH your God chooses to make His name abide. (Dt 16.11)

And The Feast of Tabernacles:

And you shall rejoice in your feast, you and your son and your daughter, your male servant and your female servant and the Levite, the stranger and the fatherless and the widow, who *are* within your gates. (Dt 16.14)

Deuteronomy 16.16 is a summary of prescriptions for all the Feasts. While the males were *required* to participate, no one in Israel was *barred* from participation.

If we were to use this type of interpretation, we would have to say that females were also excluded from participation. But the text which explains who the participants are flatly refutes that logic. “But,” it will be argued, “children are not mentioned in the prescription for the Passover in Deut 16.1-8.” This is true, but neither are women mentioned in that prescription. Yet we find in Lk 2.41 that Mary, the mother of our Lord, participated in the Passover *every year* with Joseph. Now, was Mary breaking the law by participating in the Passover? Absolutely not! There is a difference between being *required* to participate and being *allowed* to participate. Luke is showing Mary’s deep piety to be sure. As a part of God’s people Mary is allowed to participate in the sacramental meal just as *all of the rest of the congregation of Israel is allowed to participate* even though they may not be required to participate. The hardship brought about upon families in traveling seems to be at least some of the reasoning for the allowance of the absence of women and children in the OC with the centralized place of worship.

***God does not prescribe a “Bar-Mizvah” before entrance into the feasts.***

Some anti-paedocommunionists will argue from the Jewish tradition of Bar-mizvah (“son of the commandment”), which happened (happens) around age 13. It will be said that this is what Jesus is doing when Jesus was sitting in the Temple with the teachers listening to and asking them questions (Lk 2.46ff.). There is one major problem: there is no Scriptural background or evidence that God ever required this type of ceremony. This may be Jewish tradition, but it is not Scripture. And we know what Jesus says later about traditions in relationship to God’s explicit commandments. The argument from Bar-mizvah, therefore, is no *Scriptural* argument at all.

***Proselytes were included on the basis of their covenant membership***

As mentioned earlier, God made provision for the bringing in of the nations through conversion. Upon their circumcision, proselytes/converts were admitted to the sacrament of the Passover. No uncircumcised person was to eat of the Passover (cf. 12.43, “foreigner;” 12.48). But once circumcised, they were permitted to eat. Gentry makes a fine point of distinction within this text. He says that 12.48 makes a distinction between the head of the household and the rest of the household. Certainly the stranger must be circumcised and have all his males circumcised, but then only “he,” the head of the household, may come. This is what we read in Exodus 12.48-49:

And when a stranger dwells with you *and wants* to keep the Passover to YHWH, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near and keep it; and he shall be as a native of the land. For no uncircumcised person shall eat it. One law shall be for the native-born and for the stranger who dwells among you.

Gentry’s argument proves too much. What if there are mature members of the household who also have made a profession of faith? Are they not allowed to participate? If this is not the case, where are they included as is indicated by this text? Circumcision, again, is the only requirement for the males to participate in the Passover. There is no problem speaking in representative (i.e., covenantal) terms. When “he” approaches his entire household participates. Noah is credited with building the ark (Ge 6.22). But did he do it on his own? Kings are credited for winning battles (e.g., 1 Sam 30.19-20; 2 Sam 5.7), but they have armies that they lead. Elkanah is said to go and sacrifice, but it is clear that his family is with him (cf. 1 Sam 1.1ff.). Circumcision was the requirement and the only requirement for inclusion within the Passover.

At this point it should probably be asked, “If mature knowledge is a requirement for participation in the Passover, why were newly circumcised converts allowed to participate? Would not a child of the covenant who grew up learning about and living in the context in which the Passover was a part of daily life know more than some pagan just coming in?” No church that I know of thinks twice about having new adult converts admitted to the Table even though they know practically nothing about the Lord’s Supper. All they have to do is to be able to articulate trust in Christ, something which our children cannot do even though they may understand more than they can say.

I believe it is quite clear from examination of the texts that children were permitted to be a part of the Passover meal. But this is not the only worship meal in which they were allowed to participate. They were ...

**PARTICIPANTS IN OTHER SACRAMENTAL MEALS**

***Communion is paralleled in OC sacrifices according to 1 Corinthians 10.16-18.***

Here is the context: Paul is dealing with the Corinthians concerning their behavior toward one another in different matters. Some may have become presumptuous because they were members of the redeemed community, having been baptized and participating in the Lord’s Supper. Paul draws parallels (note: not contrasts) between the experiences of Israel and the church. Israel was baptized (like the Corinthians were baptized). Israel ate food “charged up” by

the Spirit and drink “charged up” by the Spirit in the manna and the water from the Rock (like the Corinthians had done in the Lord’s Supper). Without getting into all the details, Paul is telling them that this communion/fellowship/*koinonia* with Christ is a danger to the unfaithful as much as it is a blessing to the faithful. For our purposes, Paul describes the Lord’s Supper as *koinonia*, and he parallels this with the *koinonia* in the altar of Israel in the sacrifices/worship meals in the OC. (Note: not just the Passover.) This goes to my point earlier that all of the sacrifices of the OC are summed up and consummated in the Lord’s Supper. Furthermore, we know that children participated in some of those sacrifices/worship meals. Weeks and Tabernacles mentioned earlier, which included particular types of sacrifices, explicitly include children. Whenever a peace offering was offered, whether associated with a major feast or not, the worshiper and his family were allowed to eat the part of the sacrifice that was not designated for the priest (cf. Lev 7). In Deuteronomy 14, when the people of God are instructed to bring a yearly tithe, the children are to join the family in rejoicing before the Lord in eating and drinking. Trying to find places in which children are explicitly excluded is the problem.

***The qualification for participation in these sacrificial meals: baptism (i.e., cleanness).***

The only thing that disqualified a member of God’s people from participating in covenant or sacrificial meals was uncleanness. We don’t have the space to dig into all of the laws of uncleanness. But we can understand in a general fashion that when the time of uncleanness was over and the person went through baptism—i.e., the ritual cleansing rite—that allowed the person back into the worship and, thus, to the meal. In fact, this was really the particular purpose of the OC baptisms or washings. You became unclean, for instance, by touching a dead body. At that time you are cut off from the sacrificial meal or worship. You are unclean until evening. You go through baptism, and you can come back into the worship.

So it continues to be in the NC. We don’t have many baptisms any more because of the effectiveness and the once-for-all-ness of Christ’s death and resurrection. We are baptized into his death and raised with him in his resurrection. Our feet become dirty, so we need to confess our sins, and God applies the promise that is in our baptism. But we are clean. Just as all of the OC meals are summed up in the Lord’s Supper, so all of the “admittance” rites are summed up in NC baptism—including, but not exclusive to, circumcision.

So, baptism—cleanness—is what qualifies you for the feast. Indeed, that is the purpose. You are cleansed so that you may come and eat with God. Our children are declared “holy” by God (cf. e.g., 1 Cor 7.14). They are clean. So why should they be prohibited from coming to the feast? Why have we added requirements that God *nowhere* prescribes?

I believe that the Scriptures are quite clear on the matter of the participation of children in the covenant meals. Trying to exclude them from the original or subsequent Passovers as something that God *prescribes* is at least a stretch and at worst a distortion. It looks quite a bit like having a theological position into which you are trying to mold the Scriptures. Even if children weren’t permitted to Passover—which I am not conceding for one moment—all of the other sacrificial/sacramental meals that are consummated in Christ and, thus, the Lord’s Supper, many times explicitly include children with no other requirement except that they be baptized or cleansed. If in the shadows of the OC children were permitted to come and eat at their Lord’s Table, why would they not continue to be allowed to eat at their Lord’s Table in this new and better covenant?

**THE COVENANT STATUS OF CHILDREN IN THE NEW COVENANT  
1 CORINTHIANS 10.16-18**

So far in our study of the issue of covenant communion—commonly called paedocommunion—we have looked at the definition of the issue itself. Distinctions have been made between paedocommunion and so-called young-child communion. Paedocommunion is the admittance of children to the Lord’s Table based upon nothing but their baptisms. There is no examination by the pastor and/or elders. They are members of the Church by virtue of baptism and are therefore to be admitted to the family meal when they are able to eat and drink. The examination by the pastor and/or elders is the line of distinction between the practice of paedocommunion and the practice of credocommunion.

A fundamental issue concerning whether or not paedocommunion should be practiced is found in the relevance of the OT in the continued practice of the Church. That is, the question must be asked, “Were children allowed to the OC feasts/sacrifices?” If they weren’t, there would be biblical precedent for not allowing them to the feast in the NC. If they were allowed, then we must ask the question, “Why should they not be allowed to the Table now?”

There is no doubt that children participated in the covenant meals in the OC. The foundation for their participation was their membership within the people of God, not arbitrary standards of “mental capability” or even age requirements. The only requirement of them was the requirement for everyone else: that they be cleansed—i.e., go through baptism—before they came to the feast. But as soon as they were able to handle the solid food of the covenant meals they participated. We learned that children did participate in the Passover as well as other sacrificial meals, all of which are summed up in Christ and, thus, in the Lord’s Supper.

The question is then, “Has the essential status of children in the NC changed?” Baptists say “Yes.” It is on this basis that they say children ought not receive the sign of union with God’s people; i.e., baptism. And consistent with this view Baptists also say that children should not participate in the Table. But the Reformed segment of the Church has said historically that children are to receive the sign of union with Christ in baptism. But a majority of our Reformed brethren say that our children should not participate with the rest of the Church at the Table. Interestingly enough, many of these Reformed brethren use the same arguments against paedocommunion that Baptists use against paedobaptism! The question we need to ask our Reformed brethren concerning this issue is: Are children in the NC considered to be full members of the body of Christ, or is there another category of member such as a non-communing member? If there is such a membership status, what is the Scriptural evidence for it? Now, if children are considered full members, then the issue is really, for all intents and purposes, closed.

As the church we need to understand that *our baptized children enjoy the status of being true members of the body of Christ with all the rights, responsibilities, and privileges that come with that status*. In order to understand this, we must understand the promises concerning children given in the OC. These not only provide the foundation for understanding the status of children in the NC, but specific promises are given concerning the blessings of the NC.

**THE PROMISES CONCERNING CHILDREN IN THE OC**

From the beginning of redemption, which included the restoration of the family to the order God intended, the children of believing parents were included among God’s people until or unless they apostatized from the faith in later years. While the status of children was understood

before the time of Abraham, the declaration of God's covenant promises concerning children were made quite explicit when God established Abraham as the covenant mediator, the one through whom the promise of redemption would be realized.

### *The declaration of the covenant promises*

In Genesis 17 God speaks with Abraham about establishing his covenant with Abraham. Abraham will be separated from the rest of the unbelieving world by this covenant, the sign of which would be circumcision. He and his seed would be separated from the nations in order to be priest to the nations. This is more fully realized when God constitutes the sons of Israel as a nation at Sinai and says that they are a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (cf. Ex 19.6). But this inclusion among the people of God was not only for Abraham but also for all those who were members of his household.

Through his covenant, God was restoring to its proper order and bringing it to its intended purpose. God works in terms of the way he created them to be. Redemption is the freedom from slavery into which Adam's sin brought this created order. So, we would expect that God, in redeeming *his* creation, would work along the lines He created and purposed. Husbands and wives would have children, and they would bring those children up in the nurture and admonition of their God. The important statement in this establishment of this covenant for our discussion is found in Genesis 17.7: "And I will establish my covenant *between me and you and your seed after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your seed after you.*" Here God is establishing Abraham and his seed to become the line of promise through which God's redemptive purposes will be accomplished. This will be an *everlasting covenant*. This does not mean that the covenant will not undergo some transformation. It will have to do that in order to be fulfilled. But this covenant will not end. This is why later Paul will say that in Christ we are children of Abraham and heirs according to the promise (Gal 3).

The covenant is established between God and Abraham *and Abraham's children*. It is for this reason that the children of Abraham, Ishmael, who was thirteen when he was circumcised (cf. Gen 17.25), and Isaac, who was eight days old when he was circumcised (cf. Gen 21.4), received the sign of the covenant. The sign of the covenant was given because God had established the covenant with them as well as with their parents.

The language of the text, "to be a God unto you, and to your seed after you," is covenant language. God being "our God" does not refer to some generic relationship, but it refers to the specific relationship God establishes with his people. I emphasize this because of the declaration that God makes which equates the relationship he establishes with all those in covenant: "to be a God unto you, and to your seed after you." The parents and the children who are in this covenant are in *the same covenant relationship*.

While everyone within this covenant is no doubt at different levels of maturity in their faith, the fundamental relationship is the same. God does not make age distinctions between the people in the covenant as to how he will relate to them. Age distinctions are appropriate when certain responsibilities must be undertaken—e.g., signing up for war, service in the tabernacle. In those cases God is careful to give age requirements. When people had different responsibilities within this covenant body according to their maturity level, they were still fundamentally within the same covenant body as everyone else. There was one body with many different members and, therefore, differing responsibilities. But it is never said, "The adults or those who have reached 'years of discretion' will have more of a relationship with me than those who are still without



certain intellectual capabilities.” God did not make any covenant standing distinctions between Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, or any of the members of Abraham’s household. For God to be their God meant that they had rights, responsibilities, and privileges. Though they were not all equal in knowledge, understanding, or maturity, they were all equal in their covenant standing. There were no “half-members” until some cognitive conversion took place.

This type of covenant thinking is reflected throughout the OT. We sing it in the Psalms: “For you are my hope, O Lord YHWH; *You are* my trust from my youth. By you I have been upheld from birth; you are He who took me out of my mother's womb. My praise *shall be* continually of you. (Ps 71.5-6) “But you *are* he who took me out of the womb; you made me trust *while* on my mother's breasts. I was cast upon you from birth. From my mother's womb you *have been* my God.” (Ps 22.9-10).

An important note here needs to be made about the Psalms. The Psalter was God’s hymnbook for worship, not simply the nice prayers of individuals over a period of time that deserved to be recorded in the Scriptures. The Psalms that were sung reflected *God’s mind* concerning his people and how he is to be understood. In other words, God reveals himself and his ways through the Psalms as well as through other parts of the Bible. Our minds are to be conformed to his ... even if we can’t explain everything as neatly as we would like. In the Psalms there are references to children knowing the Lord from infancy (see above) and God ordaining praise in the mouths of sucklings (cf. Ps 8.2; Jesus quotes this to the Pharisees who had become indignant over the children praising Him; cf. Mt 21.16).<sup>6</sup>

While all of this can be found within the Psalter concerning the relationship of children with their God, there is nothing in the Psalter concerning children becoming a “full member” of God’s people through some type of experience when they come to years of discretion. What more is there than God being their God? Is there something more than having God as your God? Children being reared to trust their God—the God who has been a God to them from the time before their birth—was to be the normal occurrence among the people of God. Indeed, this is what God commanded in Deuteronomy 6.4ff as well as other places! There God commands his people to love him with all their hearts, souls, and strength. Then, the things that God commands are to be taught to the children. Children are to be taught how to love God with all their hearts, souls, and strength. This is the way that they are to be trained to live from the beginning. Certainly pagans would be brought in from outside the covenant. *They* would move from YHWH not being their God to YHWH being their God. But this was not the experience of God’s people who grew up in relationship with God.

How could the Psalmists and the children of Israel be assured that God was their God from their birth? As I will continue to emphasize, this assurance and this experience was *not* based upon what the person did in his intelligence, but it was based upon the *promise* of God which was, “I will be a God to you and to your children.” Even though many became presumptuous and unfaithful and were, therefore, cut off, this does not negate the covenant promises of God (which, by the way, always require faithfulness to God’s commands).

A prime example of this is found in Ezekiel in which the people of God were sacrificing their children to pagan gods. Even this did not negate God’s promise, nor did it negate their

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<sup>6</sup>For a thorough biblical, historical, and even psychological exploration of infant faith, the readers should consult Rich Lusk’s work on the issue found in his full-length treatment, *Paedofaith: A Primer on the Mystery of Infant Salvation and a Handbook for Covenant Parents* (Monroe, LA: Athanasius Press, 2005) and his essay “God of My Youth: Infant Faith in the Psalter” found in *The Case for Covenant Communion*, ed. Gregg Strawbridge (Monroe, LA: Athanasius Press, 2006).

relationship to God. Listen to what God says, Ezekiel 16.20-21, “And you took your sons and your daughters, whom you had borne to me, and these you sacrificed to them to be devoured. Were your whorings so small a matter that you slaughtered my children and delivered them up as an offering by fire to them?” Their sins were heinous *precisely because they were God’s people and these were God’s children!* It is one thing when pagans do this. It is something all together different when God’s own people do it.

### ***The declaration of the NC promises***

The membership of the children of believing parents is unquestioned in the OC. They were not half-members but enjoyed the same essential covenant standing as their parents. But how would it be in the NC? Under the OC the people of God had tremendous privilege. And what we find in the OC continues principally into the NC promises. The fundamentals of the covenant remain unchanged although it is transformed. But with the coming of Christ we have, according to the author of Hebrews, a “better covenant built upon better promises” (cf. 8.6). The promises are better not diminished.

The OC—the Law—was a ministry of death. That is, the Law’s very purpose was to bring about the death of the “seed” of Abraham. There is no doubt, as again Paul says, that the OC had glory, but the glory was fading, as is portrayed in Moses wearing the veil (cf. 2 Cor 3.1 ff.). The Law’s purpose of death was fulfilled in Christ who was born under the Law so that he might suffer the curse of the Law. With the coming of Christ and his death, resurrection, and sending of the Spirit, we in the NC have greater privilege and power. The promises given in the OC concerning the NC anticipated a more glorious age in which the Messiah would come and God’s Spirit would be poured out for the ultimate purpose of life for the world.

Now, the important thing to note at this point for our discussion is that the promises in the OC concerning the NC included our children as continuing members of God’s people. In fact, we read in Isaiah’s prophecy:

The Redeemer will come to Zion, And to those who turn from transgression in Jacob," Says YHWH. <sup>21</sup> "As for me," says YHWH, "this *is* my covenant with them: my Spirit who *is* upon you, and my words which I have put in your mouth, shall not depart from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your [seed], nor from the mouth of your seeds’ seed," says YHWH, "from this time and forevermore." (Isa 59.20-21)

The promise of the NC is that God will give His Spirit not only or exclusively to the adults, but also to the children. The children will participate with the parents in this ministry of the Spirit.

It is in light of these promises that we should read the NT concerning our children. And when we hear Peter on the Day of Pentecost say, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; ***and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*** For the ***promise*** is to you ***and to your children***, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call,” (Ac 2.38-39) our minds should immediately go to the promises of God given in the OC. On this day in which the Spirit of God was poured out as it was prophesied in Joel 2 as well as Isa 59.20-21, Peter says, “This is the fulfillment of those promises.” The future blessings to which the OC saints looked forward have now been realized in Christ. *We and our children* have become the beneficiaries of the redemption of our God. We have become the recipients of his Spirit. This promise is to us *and to our children*. And we must understand the

entire warp and woof of the NT in these terms. Indeed, for the family to be what Paul prescribes that it should be in places like Ephesians 5, the family as it existed in the old creation must die and be resurrected together in this new age of the Spirit.

### THE NT EVIDENCE FOR THE COVENANT STATUS OF COVENANT CHILDREN

This brings us to the NC itself. The OC has established the foundation for understanding our children as full members of the covenant, complete with the responsibilities and privileges. Now as the tide of redemption rolls into the greater blessings of the NC, we see evidence of the full membership of our children in the NT.

#### *Children are members of the kingdom of God*

There was an incident which involved children in the ministry of Jesus in which Jesus makes a very plain declaration concerning the status of covenant children in relationship to the kingdom which Jesus Himself was bringing in. In Matthew 19.13-15 (par. Mk 10.13-16; Lk 18.15-17) children are brought to Jesus in order that he might pronounce covenant blessing upon them. The Matthean account reads this way, “Then little children were brought to him that he might put *his* hands on them and pray, but the disciples rebuked them. But Jesus said, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven.’ And he laid *his* hands on them and departed from there.” This was an act of a covenant mediator at some level or another (cf. e.g., Isaac blessing Jacob; Jacob blessing his sons; etc.) Priests, also as a certain type of covenant mediator, had the direct responsibility for blessing the people of God (cf. e.g., Num 6.22ff.).

The disciples tried to keep the children from coming to Christ, but Christ rebuked them and said, “Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: *for of such is the kingdom of heaven*” (Mt 19.14). The importance of this statement is understood in the light of what the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God is. Tim Gallant gives a good summary definition of the kingdom when he defines it as “the new covenant order by which God rules the world through the mediation of Christ.” (*Feed My Lambs*, 23) Jesus said that little children, even infants (Gr. *brephos*) according to Luke’s account, are those who are citizens of this kingdom. This is quite interesting in light of what Jesus says to Nicodemus in John 3. There Jesus told Nicodemus that a person cannot even *see* the kingdom of God unless he is born from above! Yet Jesus says that these children are members of the kingdom.

Some will say that Jesus is using children only for an illustration of how a person is to enter the kingdom. Because you know Jesus also said, “Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Mt 18.3) There are two things that need to be said about this: (1) Jesus was referring to and dealing with ‘real’ children in Mt 19, and (2) children are the measure of conversion, not adults.

First, Jesus was not using children as an illustration only. He took them and he blessed them. He wasn’t blessing an illustration. He was blessing children. He acted as a priest for the children that came to him there on that day, pronouncing God’s covenant blessing on them. This whole scene of laying hands on them and blessing them in light of the ministry of Jesus as recorded for us throughout the Gospels is quite telling. Jesus makes the people he touches clean. These children are clean or holy as Paul says in 1Corinthians 7.14. Being clean means that they have access to God’s sanctuary and, therefore, have the privileges of any other worshiper who

approaches God appropriately. In Scripture, worshipers who have been made clean through baptism are able to enjoy Table fellowship.

Second, Jesus said that we are to be converted and become as little children ... and that is precisely my point. In our churches we have demanded that our children be “converted” before they can come to the Table. This word “conversion” has picked up much baggage over the years. Conversion is popularly understood as that cognitive experience of some sort in which a person who is of a mature, reasoning age and capability has a noticeable transformation of life. This person moves from a life of abject rebellion against God to a life of submission to God. What we have done, especially since the time of the puritans and revivalism, is to expect this type of “conversion experience” by every person without exception ... even our children who have learned to trust Christ from the youngest of ages (in obedience to commands such as are found in Deut 6 and Eph 6). This “conversion experience” has become the threshold that allows our covenant children to come to the Table. We have taken what should be the experience of a pagan—something I am not denying in the least—and we have made this the measure of conversion for all people, including our children. My contention is that we have it all backwards based upon what Jesus says in these passages. The measure of conversion is not to be the adult and his experience, but the covenant child’s experience. We are told that we are to be converted and become as those children to whom Christ was referring. *Children are the standard of measurement*, so to speak, for conversion, not adult, pagan conversion.

Children are members of the kingdom of God where Christ acts as their High Priest as well as ours as adults. As children of the kingdom they should be admitted to the privileges their High Priest has secured for them, assuring them of his work in their behalf. But what we have today mimics precisely what the disciples were doing on that particular day: rebuking people for bringing children to Jesus. The answer to this is, “We are not forbidding them to come to Jesus, just to the Table.” If this is our answer, then it shows up what we really believe about the Table and Christ’s presence there. Historically we Reformed folk have believed that Christ is truly present at the Supper, though not in a corporeal fashion. Rather he is truly present in the Person and power of his Spirit. It is this that underlies the fact that our Standards say that we “truly and really” feed upon Christ at the Table but not “corporally or carnally” (i.e., not upon human flesh; cf. WLC 170). Christ is present at the Table, bidding his people to come. We church leaders are with the disciples, rebuking parents for bringing their children to be blessed by Christ. We need the rebuke. Jesus isn’t happy with us.

Some might respond: “That is an emotional argument.” I must agree to a certain extent. Jesus seems to have been a little emotional about the issue as well. Just because an argument evokes emotion does not mean that it is based in emotion. For instance, when we hear of parents putting their babies in garbage sacks and putting them in the dumpster, we should become a little emotional. We become emotional not because this is a “purely emotional issue.” We become emotional because the parents are doing something sinful and we hate it. This issue ought to evoke some emotion. Children are not being treated right all the while we are telling them that this is what Jesus says. How are the blessings of Jesus conveyed to his children today? Through the hands of his representatives. We have the responsibility to do just what Jesus would do. And the cup of blessing which we bless (1Cor 10.16-17) should not be withheld from those Jesus himself would and did bless.

In redeeming the world that fell into sin in Adam, God is restoring people and their relationships to the place He intended them in the beginning. He has made it clear through his promises that our children are numbered among his people. We are called to respond in faith and

believe the promise. Believing this promise involves recognizing our children, not as second-class members of the kingdom, but as full members of the one body, the Church.

### *Children Are Baptized Into Christ*

In answering the question concerning paedocommunion, we must first ask ourselves a question concerning paedobaptism, *Why do we baptize our children?* Is baptism merely the dedication of our children to God in hopes that they will become members of the Church one day, or is it God's declaration that they are members of the Church and our response in faith to God's promise/word? The question is, as always, What does God say about our children? Answer that question, then the other issues begin to fall in line.

For many of us, this is something that is well-known and accepted. But I want to take this and lead to the question before us concerning paedocommunion. As explored under the previous heading, God commanded that children be included within and recognized as people who belonged to him. They were *his children*. As we saw, God declares this plainly about the children of his people who were being sacrificed to idols in Ezekiel 16:20-21. Beyond the issue of "is circumcision equal to baptism" is the larger issue of, "Does God consider the children of believing parents as members of His people?"<sup>7</sup> Again, what does God say about our children? It is from that question that you must work. Then when it has been established that God *does* consider the children as members of His people, then it follows that they should receive the sign of union with God's people in the NC as the did in the OC.

Our actions are to correspond to God's declaration. *We* are not asserting something about our children primarily. We are representing and applying God's word. This status of children is consistent throughout the history of redemption and is the basic assumption in the NT. For instance, Paul has no problem addressing the *saints*—literally, *holy ones*—of the church of Ephesus (1:1). Then, later on in the book, addressing the children, reminding them of covenant obligations (obey their parents) and covenant promise (they will inherit the land; cf. 6:1-3). Paul assumes the continuity of the Fifth Word/Commandment to our children with the same promise attached thereto; only the promises have been expanded. They have covenant responsibilities and covenant promise. He does the same thing when he writes to the church in Colossae (cf. 1:2; 3:20). Paul, comforting and instructing believing parents in Corinth tells them that their children are "holy," they are set apart from the unbelieving world by virtue of their covenant standing (cf. 1Cor 7:14). God has set them apart by His word. As mentioned earlier, the children are heirs of the promise along with their parents as Peter proclaimed on the Day of Pentecost (cf. Acts 2:39). We baptize our children because they are God's children and they are to be recognized as belonging to God.

God distinguishes His people from the world by means of objective, visible, tangible signs and seals that we normally call *sacraments*. Again, none of this is foreign to our own Standards or any other Reformed Confession. A summary of our own Standards' position can be

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<sup>7</sup> While the equation between circumcision and baptism can be helpful, it is not the only argument. Baptism in the NC certainly includes circumcision (as I believe Paul makes clear in Col 2.11-12). But baptism has a far more extensive history in creation, the flood, and the cleansing rites in the OC. So, while the relationship between circumcision and baptism is helpful, the larger context needs to be taken into consideration. Baptism is baptism; just like it has always been in one respect. For further exploration of this topic, see my paper, *Infant Baptism, The New Man, And The New Creation*, pp. 13-15 (<http://www.communitypca.org/wp-content/uploads/2007/11/Infant-Baptism-New-Man-New-Creation.pdf>)

found in WLC 166 “*Unto whom is baptism to be administered?*” A. Baptism is not to be administered to any that are out of the visible church, and so strangers from the covenant of promise, till they profess their faith in Christ, and obedience to him, but infants descended from parents, either both or but one of them professing faith in Christ, and obedience to him, are, in that respect, ***within the covenant***, and to be baptized.” It is proclaimed that they are “within the covenant.”

The Heidelberg Catechism, the catechism of the Dutch Reformed Church and accepted as sound and useful in our own denomination speaks strongly concerning the membership of our children in “Lord’s Day 27 Q/A 74: “*Are infants also to be baptized?*” Yes; for since they, as well as adults, are included ***in the covenant*** and ***the Church of God***, and since both redemption from sin and the Holy Spirit ... are through the blood of Christ promised to them no less than to adults, they must also by baptism, as a sign of the covenant, ***be ingrafted into the Christian Church***, and distinguished from the children of unbelievers.” Our fathers at the Synod of Dort—the ones who developed what we now know as the “five points of Calvinism”—believed God’s promise concerning our children so strongly that they would say in Canon 1 Article 17 (1:17):

Since we are to judge the will of God from his Word, which testifies that the children of believers are holy, not by nature, but in virtue of the covenant of grace, in which they together with the parents are comprehended, godly parents have no reason to doubt of the election and salvation of their children whom it pleaseth God to call out of this life in their infancy. (Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:585)

Most in the Reformed tradition have believed and confessed that our children are so considered members of God’s people, that if they should die in infancy, we have God’s promise that they will participate in the glory that is to come.

God has made a promise and included our children in the promise. The promise is to them as well as to us. They are considered to be members of God’s church and, for this reason, they are to receive the sign of union with God’s people, which under the OC was circumcision since the time of Abraham and under the NC is baptism exclusively.

Our children are to receive the sign of union with Christ grounded in the promise of God himself. This moves us into a follow-up question: *What does baptism mean?* That is, what is God saying/doing in baptism? This answer could take a long time, but I want to focus on a couple of strands of thought.

First, we must deal with the question that might arise in our circles when you ask the question, “What does baptism mean?” Some will retort, “Which baptism? Spirit or water?” It is popular and common in today’s church to distinguish between “real/Spirit baptism” and “water baptism.” That is, there is a *reeaal* baptism that takes place some time in life which may or may not have anything to do with the time of the “mere” water baptism. Sadly, many Reformed folks have fallen in with others who hold to this view of baptism. The problem with this “distinction” is that it cannot stand up under the scrutiny of Scripture, which is the ultimate authority in the issue.

But some will say, “But what about the book of Acts? We see people receiving the Holy Spirit and then being water baptized. Are they not then two separate events?” There is much that could be dealt with here (and, no wonder, I have dealt with this in a paper ... a proper Reformed

thing to do!<sup>8</sup>). But the main thing to remember here is that this is a new era of God's working out his plan. What happens throughout the book of Acts as the gospel moves into new areas is somewhat of a repetition of Pentecost, confirming the movement of the kingdom from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria and then to the uttermost parts of the world. Once the Holy Spirit demonstrates that this new door has been opened (so to speak), the ordinary way someone enters into this work is through baptism. Each person baptized enters into this "one baptism" received by the Church (more on this in a moment).

Our discomfort with the fact that "water baptism" comes to be inseparable from "Spirit baptism" in the Scriptures is that we don't want to believe that anyone who really participates in the baptism of the Spirit can apostatize. We have made "Spirit baptism" to be only of the eternally elect, therefore, it cannot be associated with water baptism. This is a category mistake. We desire things to be a little more neat and tidy in our theology instead of not fully understanding how the Spirit operates in individual hearts. He sovereignly works where he will and how he will and he doesn't ask us any questions or explain to us in detail everything that he does.

While our discomfort level may rise when we look at the Scriptural evidence and see that water baptism *is* Spirit baptism, it is our thinking that needs to be re-arranged, not the language of Scripture. Our discomfort would ease if we looked at the situation through the lens of covenant—the principle that God has given us to interpret these things—instead of the lens of secret election—something through which God does not allow us to look. The only time we can know God's secret plan is after happens (and then only imperfectly). When it happens, we know that this was the way God planned it. But when dealing with present relationships, Christian status, apostasy and the like, we are to view things through the objective means God has given us, through the lens of covenant. It is through this lens that we can understand how a person can participate in the baptism of the Spirit and still maintain the possibility of apostasy.

Each person who is baptized has the same essential covenant standing before God and with one another. In other words, we are all members of the Church which is the house and family of God (cf. WCF 25.2). This is the only way to reconcile passages that deal with apostasy and security. For example, the writer of Hebrews does not miss a stroke when writing to Christians warning them of the dangers of falling away:

*For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, **if they fall away**, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put *Him* to an open shame. (Heb 6.4-6)*

And again, in Hebrews 10.29, those who fall away have counted the blood of the covenant *wherewith they were sanctified* an unholy thing and *done despite to the Spirit of grace*.

Those who are baptized participate in the Spirit. The reason for this is that those who are baptized, entering into Christ's church, participate in the baptism of the Spirit that happened on the Day of Pentecost. The Spirit baptized the Church corporately. In our baptism, we enter into that baptism that happened on that day. Each of us enters into that one baptism. Therefore, there

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<sup>8</sup>*The Waters That Divide?* can be found here:  
<http://www.communitypca.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/02/the-waters-that-divide.pdf> .

is only *one baptism*, not two or three or four.

This is what Paul tells us in Ephesians 4.4-5: “*There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism....*” Paul speaks to the Corinthians about this as well in another context: “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body -- whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free -- and have all been made to drink into one Spirit.” (1Cor 12.13) Though the proof texts in our Confession are not binding (i.e., we don’t subscribe to the way they use those specific texts), they are telling us to the way the divines were thinking at points. When speaking about baptism into the “visible Church” in WCF 28.1, they use 1Corinthians 12:13 as a proof text. This verse is commonly understood as speaking about “real” baptism as opposed to “water” baptism. The Biblical doctrine is that the Spirit baptizes each every person that is baptized in the name of our Triune God and brings them into the church. That is Spirit baptism.

Now, our children to whom baptism rightfully belongs are participants in this baptism just like everyone else who is baptized. This is what is included in the promises, if you recall, in Isa 59 and what Peter reiterates in Acts 2. Again, our discomfort with all of this is that there are dangers in speaking this way. People will begin to assume that they and their children, just because they have been baptized, can rest on their laurels and not worry about anything else. Well, there are always dangers in communicating the truth of the gospel. This is one reason that God does not plan for us to hear the truth in part but continue living in the church and hearing the whole council of God. If Paul had stopped Romans after chapter 5, people would have said, “I guess we should sin all the more because where sin abounds, grace much more abounds.” Paul goes on to explain that this cannot be the case. (And, interestingly enough, bases his exhortation on their baptism.)

When I say that we and our children are all “Spirit baptized” and real and full members of Christ, this needs to be qualified. Let me make it clear: *Baptism does not equal full and final salvation (i.e., eschatological salvation)*. That is, it doesn’t mean that they will, without a doubt, participate in the resurrection of the just. This is neither true for children or adults (of which Simon Magus in Acts 8 is a prime example). Baptism is not a ground for presumption of full and final salvation, and neither is the Lord’s Supper, nor is a “decision for Christ” or praying the sinner’s prayer. The promise of God in Christ is the ground of our assurance and persevering faith is the instrument of our assurance (cf. 2 Pet 1.1ff.). Teaching people the *Biblical* doctrine of the meaning of baptism does not promote presumption but perseverance. Indeed, our Larger Catechism exhorts us to improve our baptism throughout our lives (WLC #167).

Another point that needs to be made clear is that *we are not denying that our children are sinners in need of salvation*. Indeed, baptizing our children acknowledges the fact that they are sinners who need to look to Christ for forgiveness of sins. We acknowledge that our children are sinners from the womb and that their only hope is the grace of God. We deny the unbiblical doctrine of an “age of accountability” at which time the child becomes accountable for his sin because he has reached some unseen threshold of reasoning ability and can appreciate the distinction between sin and righteousness. Children are accountable to God for sin from the time of conception (cf. Psa 51:5; 58:3). They become more accountable as they learn, but they are always accountable. No one can be saved by ignorance. We are saved by the grace of God through faith alone.

Consequently, *we are not denying that our children must trust Christ*. They must be taught what it means and what it looks like to trust Christ from their infancy. They must be taught that Christ died for their sins and rose again. They must be taught that they must rely fully



upon Christ and remain faithful to him throughout their days lest they be cut off.

In their baptism they have been joined to Christ by being joined to his body through baptism and they must continue in union with him through faith (cf. John 15:1ff.). According to what Paul says in Galatians 3:27-28 all those who have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. This is an extremely important piece to the puzzle that Paul is constructing in the epistle to the Galatians. Here Paul is dealing with the issue of baptism and how it relates to “full” membership in the Church. Paul is arguing in Galatians that there are not two gospels. One problem that sparked this letter was that many Jews were telling people that being identified with Christ through baptism was simply not enough to be in “full membership” in the people of God. In order for people to be “full” members, they must be circumcised and observe the OC dietary laws and separation requirements. In other words, how do we know who the people of God are, and, thus, with whom do we eat? Paul says that all people, Jews and Gentiles alike, are justified by faith in Christ, included in his Church, and should eat at the same table. In fact, he confronted Peter over this issue (cf. Gal 2).

Here was the question: Are the Gentiles “full members” or “equal members” of God’s people even though they have not been circumcised? Consequently, are they welcomed to eat at the same table as the Jewish Christians? Paul says that those who have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ and there is neither Jew nor Greek, male or female, bond or free. We are all one in Christ. His logic runs like this: A. Being incorporated into Christ is sufficient to be called one of God’s people. B. In your baptism you have put on Christ. C. Therefore, you do not need circumcision because in Christ you have all that you need. All those who are baptized into Christ are *one* with one another. As far as covenant standing is concerned, we are all equally members of Christ. Baptism into Christ tells us with whom we are supposed to be sharing the Table.

This truth is important in itself and relates intimately with the issue of paedocommunion. How is this continuing unity expressed? How do we know who is a member of the church and who isn’t Sunday by Sunday? Those people who come to the Table and eat with us. This is what Paul tells the Corinthians in 1Corinthians 10.17: “Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; *for* [in the sense of “because”] we all partake of the one bread.” Paul says that there is only “one bread” because there is only “one body.” We who are many are one body, *because* we all partake of the one bread. The Supper says who is in the body and, by definition, who is out. The Supper actually forms the body of Christ according to Paul’s wording (i.e., we are one body *because* we all partake of the one bread).

The question is now, Are children a part of that loaf? Well, we have answered that question: they are members of Christ by virtue of God’s declaration demonstrated in their baptism. If then they are a part of the ‘loaf’ which the ‘loaf’ represents, why are they not able to partake of the sign of the reality of their standing? Why are we not able to say about them what God says about them? There is one Table at which the church is shown to be the church. Indeed, those who are barred from the Table, unbelievers and those who have been excommunicated, are not a part of the church. Why? Because God’s people eat God’s food. This is holy food for holy people ... and remember, our children are declared by God to be holy (1 Cor 7.14 and “saints”).

The Lord’s Supper is for the church ... *the whole church*. It is the place where we are formed into the body of Christ. As regards standing within the church, either you are in or you are out, not somewhere in between. If you are in the “loaf” you have the covenant right and privilege of partaking of the sacramental loaf. There is no such thing as a loaf outside of this loaf or even within it that is a non-communing loaf. That makes no biblical sense.

Some retort: Well, small infants and some infirm people do not have the ability to

participate. Are they not a part of the body of Christ? May it never be! While some may not have the *physical ability* to eat—whether because of age or infirmity—this does not mean that they are *barred* from the Table based on those incapacities. There is a huge difference between being incapable and being disallowed. They are simply providentially unable to participate. But they have every covenant right to the Table if they are able because they are members of Christ if they have been baptized into Christ.

Either our children are “full members” of the church or they are no members at all. There is no other Scriptural category for members of the church in the Bible. And being a member of the body of Christ is the qualification that admits a person to the Lord’s Table because that person is a part of the body. It is really that simple. We need not dig into a person’s intellectual abilities or some other immeasurable standard of admittance. If someone is baptized he is to be admitted to the Table. Certainly there are consequences for the unfaithful. And God will judge them if they do not judge themselves. But we are not to bar people from the Table with unbiblical qualifications ... especially our children whom God in his grace has received as his own.

### **OBJECTIONS TO PAEDOCOMMUNION FROM 1CORINTHIANS 11.17-34** **PART 1: SETTING THE STAGE**

One passage of Scripture that is employed probably more than any other in objecting to paedocommunion is 1Corinthians 11:17-34. The objections of anti-paedocommunionists are rooted in the commands and implications of those commands. It is said that the nature of these commands naturally exclude children who have not reached a particular stage of maturity; or as our Standards say, “years of discretion.” We read of “remembering,” “examining” oneself, and “discerning the Lord’s body.” All of these things, it is thought, are things that little children cannot do. Therefore, little children cannot be brought to the Table. I must say also that this has been the majority report in Reformed circles for hundreds of years with no less than John Calvin using this passage to speak against paedocommunion (or covenant communion).<sup>9</sup> One of the problems, I believe, in using 1Corinthians 11 as an objection is that it is used as if it were an isolated text. Understanding it in the entire ebb and flow of the letter, I believe, will not only discount this passage as an objection to paedocommunion, but will, indeed, turn it around for a strong case for it.

What needs to be done as the first order of business is to set the stage. We could go straight to the places where there are objections and answer them one-by-one, but then we would be treating this passage as an isolated text, somehow unrelated to what goes on before and beyond it. So, we are going to take a tour of 1Corinthians up to the point of our passage and set the context for the discussion Paul enters into in chapter 11. Then we will briefly survey the passage itself drawing Paul’s main concerns demonstrating that this passage *does not* address the paedocommunion issue.

#### **CONCERN OF THE LETTER**

First, we need to look at the people to whom Paul is addressing this letter. He states this

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<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that Calvin recognizes that the practice of the early church, as evidenced in Cyprian (3<sup>rd</sup> century) and Augustine (4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> centuries), was to admit very young children to the Supper. He didn’t think it should happen, but he recognized there was historical precedent. Cf. *Institutes* 4.16.30

plainly for us in the opening of the epistle: the church, and the church is those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus (i.e., they are “set apart” or “holy”), called to be “saints” (i.e., holy ones) (1.2). These are members of the Church and therefore participants at the Table. The church has been called into the “fellowship” (*koinonian*) of God’s Son, Jesus Christ our Lord (1.9). *All* the saints have been called into this “fellowship” or “communal participation” with God’s Son ... even the children who are declared by God to be “holy” or “saints” in 1Corinthians 7:14. This is the same terminology used in 10.16-17 to speak about our “communion” with the body and blood of Christ. There is a basic connection between the two that should not be missed. The Table is where the *fellowship* with Christ takes place and, thus, those who are in fellowship with Christ are at this Table.

This fellowship is being disrupted in Corinth, and these disruptions are part of Paul’s major concern for writing the letter. He is concerned about *divisions in the church* (1.10-12). Particular issues and personalities are dividing them. Paul is dealing with the arrogance of many sectarians in the church. Some consider themselves better than others, and, obviously, were not too impressed with Paul. While many of the Corinthians would boast in their “wisdom,” “knowledge,” or even their “gifts,” Paul’s glory was in the shame of the cross and his identification with Christ (1.18-2:5). Wisdom is in the gospel of Christ (2.6-16). Contrary to what many of the Corinthians believed, they have shunned this wisdom by dividing themselves. In this they are acting like “natural men,” people outside of fellowship with Christ, the pagan culture around them (3.1-4).

While many of the Corinthians were lining themselves up under different ministers of the gospel—Paul, Apollos, Peter, and some even say “Christ”—God’s ministers are not divided. Indeed, they are all working together in order to build God’s house, the church. God’s ministers—Paul, Apollos, etc.—are working for one common purpose. Therefore they are unified. (3.5-17) Christ’s ministers to whom Paul is referring are not like the pagan philosophers who have their own “schools” of thought and thus particular bands of followers.

These divisions, to a great degree, are reflections of the pagan culture from which they have been delivered. Any kind of so-called wisdom that promotes divisions within the body of Christ through arrogance and self-aggrandizement is no wisdom at all. And those who maliciously destroy the church this way will be destroyed by God (3.18-23; which may be quite an interesting statement in light of what happens in ch. 11).

Arrogance characterizes many in the Corinthian church. They think themselves “wiser” than everyone else. Paul condemns this arrogance and will condemn it when he sees them again (4.6-21). Paul is very sarcastic in this section. Their arrogance has actually led them in the opposite direction of what is right. They have allowed a man in an incestuous relationship to remain in their fellowship (5.1-13). Their divisions have been taken to the world’s courts as they sue one another in Caesar’s law courts. They are doing wrong to one another and cheating one another. Paul emphasizes that they are doing this to their *brethren*. Those practicing these immoral lives will not inherit the kingdom of God (6.1-11). He continues to tell them that union with Christ and his body—i.e., “fellowship”—means that you should not engage in sexual immorality (6.12-20).

In chapter 7 Paul, in answer to a question sent to him by the Corinthians, deals with the issues of marriage, divorce, remarriage and how children are “holy” by virtue of one believing parent.

Then, in chapter 8 he begins addressing another question before them that deals with how we treat one another within the body of Christ and why. Because of the textual indicators that

Paul uses elsewhere, I believe that this section runs from 8-11 (not 8-10 as some do). The problem has to do with eating meat offered to idols. While there are many theological issues in this passage, Paul's basic discussion runs along the lines concerning unity within the body. Those who think they have "knowledge" are not using that knowledge in loving manner, which edifies, but in a self-centered way so that they may be recognized. While eating meat that has been sacrificed to idols is not inherently bad—those with "knowledge" did have a good theology of creation—arrogance coupled with a good theology can be devastating to weaker brethren. Those who have "knowledge" ought to be more concerned about being "stumbling blocks" to the weak than exhibiting their "spiritual knowledge" (8.1-13). Those who are mature care about others within the body and defer to them when it is for their benefit.

Paul himself provides a pattern for imitation. When it is for the good of the body, he will deny himself that to which he is entitled. His aim is to serve all men and see people saved (9.1-27). But the actions of the Corinthians are analogous to the people of God who were delivered from Egypt, whose carcasses fell in the wilderness. Mere participation in the sacraments did not keep God's people from participating in idolatry (10.7), sexual immorality (10.8), tempting Christ (10.9), or complaining against God (10.10) and being judged for all of these things. Neither would participation in the sacraments—especially the Christian feast, the Eucharist—prevent the Corinthians from slipping off into these sins. Holiness of life was to accompany life within the community of God's people. Part of that holiness of life for the Corinthian Christians was to resist the pagan influences of sectarianism which is reflected in their pagan rituals as much as anything else and celebrate the meal that God had given them in the way that God wanted them to celebrate it: in unity.

Paul tells them that what it means to be the true people of God is to love one another by deferring to weaker members, thus maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. While eating meat offered to idols may not be a problem, they are to stay away from pagan temples because they cannot be united with the pagans and the people of God (which eating at pagan altars exhibits; 10.14ff.). Paul tells them in what is known to us as 11.1 to imitate him (Paul) as he imitates Christ. They are to promote selflessly the unity within the body of Christ instead of insisting on personal rights and privileges, acting in arrogance.

Chapter 11 begins with a word of praise for the Corinthians because they have kept the traditions that Paul delivered to them (one of which was the practice of the Lord's Supper; cf. 11.23). Paul praises them for obviously maintaining the traditions which he delivered to them. But there does seem to be at least some misunderstanding concerning the various roles and proper distinctions within the church between men and women (11.2-16; cp. 14.33-35).

While there is praise for their proper observance of one tradition delivered to them by Paul, there is explicit rebuke for the manner in which they are observing the Lord's Supper. With the context of the entire passage in mind and from the immediate context, which is quite explicit, they are observing the Lord's Supper in a divisive manner (cf. 11.18). This specific content is that to which we now turn.

### **CONTENT OF THE PASSAGE**

From this passage it seems that some were coming to the worship of the church and bringing their food (which seems to have been a practice in the early church for the Lord's Supper). Some were rich. Others were poor. The rich were eating their own food even before the others arrived and were filling themselves up without thinking of the others. This is more in line

with pagan feasts of self-indulgence. It is completely contrary to all for which the Supper stands.

### *The Historical Context: Selfishness and Schism at the Supper*

Paul begins his rebuke in v. 17: “Now in giving these instructions I do not praise *you*, since you come together not for the better but for the worse.” Paul cannot praise the Corinthians for the next area which he must discuss. In fact he says here and in 11.22, “I do not praise you.” There seems to be a play on their disunity with the words “come together.” They are “coming together” while being divided. This particular verb form is used five times in this passage (11.17, 18, 20, 33, 34). Whereas love edifies and a loving fellowship would be coming together for “the better,” they are coming together “for the worse.” He says, “For first of all, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you, and in part I believe it.” They are “coming together as the church,” but there are divisions. He continues, “For there must also be factions among you, that those who are approved may be recognized among you.” There are two ways to understand what Paul is saying here, one of which I believe is preferable.

First, Paul might be employing sarcasm. If so, the understanding would be, “in order for the ‘approved ones’ to ‘shine,’ there must be factions. Factions are the means by which some stand out over against the others. If everyone is unified and they were serving one another, who could be really noticed like that? No, in order to be recognized or made manifest, there must be factions. Small people need big spotlights. Dividing up according to their societal ranks within the church at the time of the meal is just the spotlight they need.

A second way to look at this would be that factions must come so that the ones who are tested and approved will be made manifest. God will make it clear through judgment who are approved by him and who are not.

I believe the first is more plausible in light of what Paul says in the next verse (as well as the fact that he has employed it earlier in dealing with their arrogance in ch. 4): “Therefore when you come together in one place, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper.” It is on this basis (cf. “therefore”) that when they come together it is *not* to eat the Lord's Supper. Remember what Paul has said about the Christian view of the church as opposed to paganism. We are to be unified through serving one another and not ourselves. In this we follow the example of Christ and the cross, which is foolishness to the world (cf. 1.18ff.). When we come together to eat the Lord's Supper we are “one loaf.” To eat this “one loaf” being divided is to lie about Christ. This conduct is not at all consistent with the Lord to whom this Supper belongs.

Paul continues in 11.21: “For in eating, each one takes his own supper ahead of *others*; and one is hungry and another is drunk.” This is the explanation of what Paul has just said. “For” explains the reason for what has been said; i.e., this is why they are *not* taking the Lord's Supper. Here is the *manner* (note this in light of 11.27) in which they are taking what they call “the Lord's Supper”: people bring their own food and one person is hungry while another is completely indulged, of which drunkenness is quite reflective. Bringing your own food and eating it without sharing with others with whom you share a common life, with whom you are in fellowship or communion (*koinonia*) in Christ, speaks just the opposite of what the cross of Christ and the Supper is all about. The ritual of Lord's Supper was celebrated around a complete meal (even though it could be celebrated apart from it in light of what Paul says about eating complete meals at home later). People would bring the food and wine and they would eat the Supper together. But only those people who brought food were eating. Those who could only bring a little, ate little. Those who brought much indulged themselves.

The rebuke gains intensity in 11.22: “What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you in this? I do not praise *you*.” Paul is obviously appalled at this type of selfish attitude which promotes and reveals disunity within the body of Christ. In these actions they are treating the church of God with contempt and disgracing those who have nothing. Now, those who were seeking to be “recognized” or to be praised through their promotion of these schisms in the church find themselves finding disapproval from Paul the apostle. They cannot be praised.

***The Sacramental Context: A Reminder of the Institution (23-26)***

Paul then takes them back to the foundations for the Supper in 11.23-26: “For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the *same* night in which he was betrayed took bread; and when he had given thanks, he broke *it* and said, ‘Take, eat; this is my body which is broken for you; do this as my memorial.’ In the same manner *he* also *took* the cup after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. This do, as often as you drink *it*, as my memorial.’<sup>10</sup> For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death till he comes.” This is one of the traditions that Paul has received that he has delivered to the Corinthians on a previous occasion and is now reminding them of it.

While this passage is loaded with theology, there are certain lines in it that I want to trace that deal with specifics of the Corinthian situation. Two particularly: (1) the selfless sacrifice of Christ and (2) the covenant renewal nature of the Supper.

What we see in the words of institution is the selfless sacrifice that is emphasized throughout. Christ did not exert personal privilege or his rights. Rather, Christ emptied himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. (Phil 2:6-8) Here in the very words of institution of the Supper we see that He says, “Take, eat; this is my body which is broken *for you*.” Contrary to the selfish agendas of many in the Corinthian church stands the service of our Lord to us as is reflected in the eating of that one loaf of which we are all a part. I do not believe that Paul makes stark differences between the *physical* body of Christ and the body of Christ, the church. I am not saying that he does not recognize the distinctions between the two, but he exchanges between the two quite freely as can be seen in 10.16-17. As his body, we too are to give ourselves for others, especially those within the body.

Then there is the nature of the “remembrance” that is going on in the Supper as Jesus said, “Do this in remembrance of me” after both the bread and the wine. This has significance concerning the nature of the Supper itself and its connection with the memorials in the OC. Since I will explain it more in the next section as I answer the specific objections raised from this passage, I will only briefly mention it here with some references to our specific discussion.

The Lord’s Supper is a covenant meal and is, therefore, a “memorial” before the Lord. This is the way these “remembrance” statements as well as Paul’s explanation of “proclaiming the Lord’s death” is to be understood. The Supper’s immediate context is that of the Passover (which itself is not insignificant to the discussion of paedocommunion as we have seen). And the Passover was clearly a memorial before the Lord (cf. e.g., Exod 12:14).

First and foremost, a memorial was observed in order to be seen by the Lord (i.e., just as the blood on the doorposts would be seen, God would remember His covenant promise, pass

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<sup>10</sup>See below for the discussion of the translation “as my memorial.”

over that house, and judge the Egyptians). God does not need “reminding.” But the signs and seals that he has set up for us to observe are for his acting in the behalf of his people to deliver them and for the destruction of our enemies. This, I believe, is what Paul means when he says, “For as often as we eat this bread and drink this cup we proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes.” (11.26) In the Supper the death of the Lord is proclaimed to the Father who sees and hears and acts for the deliverance of *his people*—of which children are a part—and the destruction of his enemies.

When we observe the Lord’s Supper it is a memorial meal. Therefore it is more about what God sees than about any particular mental state or capacity at the time. Understanding the meal in this context (which is surely correct) takes the focus off the individual participant and his capacities and places it within its proper covenantal context.

I believe that the meal has a remembrance aspect for the community also. But just as in the OC covenant meals, the focus was on the remembrance of the community as a whole. The Supper keeps the community reminded of God’s deliverance and our covenant obligations. Each time we take the Lord’s Supper the covenant is being renewed. And covenant renewal was something that the children participated in throughout redemptive history (cf. e.g., Deut 29–30; esp. 29:10-11; cf. also Joshua 8:30-35; esp. v. 35). Also, as I have discussed previously, Paul equates the Lord’s Supper in some respect with all of the sacrifices offered on the altar in the OC in 1 Cor 10.18. “Remembrance” was a community affair. It was the context for the entire community to “remember,” memorialize, their deliverance.

With our radically individualized way of thinking, it is difficult for us to think in terms of “community remembrance.” Nevertheless, we do it all the time. Think of it in terms of our country and July 4. On this day the nation “remembers” our independence. This does not mean that since our children cannot cognitively ponder what the Declaration of Independence means that they cannot “remember” the Fourth with us. We even have a Memorial Day in which we as a nation remember the men and women who died in service to our country. The whole country memorializes the day whether each individual engages in cognitive recollection or not. (This, of course, does not even touch the significance of the Church’s memorializing, but it is analogous in some respects.)

So then, in the words of institution the Corinthians are reminded of the selflessness of our Lord in giving himself for us and that it is we as his people in our joint participation who proclaim the death of the Lord to the Father.

### ***The Exhortation: Observe the Supper Rightly (27-34)***

Paul moves on in v. 27 and says, “Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks *this* cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord.” I don’t have the time to trace this out fully for you, but there is a broad reference here to the shedding of innocent blood and that blood calling for vengeance from the avenger of blood. For instance, Cain killed Abel and Abel’s blood cried from the ground. The blood of all the prophets from Abel to Zechariah son of Berechiah calls for vengeance which is executed upon the Jews in A.D. 70. Violence fills the earth in the time of Noah, and God must cleanse the earth. Pharaoh kills all the innocent children in the Nile, Moses comes and calls that blood back up, and God visits Egypt with destruction. Being blood guilty has to do with the avenger of blood being called up to execute the guilty. Sometimes this is the nearest human kin. Sometimes it is YHWH himself. To eat and drink this cup in an unworthy manner is to be *guilty* of the body and blood of the Lord

because you then stand with those who crucified Christ. (cf. Heb 6.6).

Understand that Paul is not saying that a person must be “worthy.” The word is best translated by the AV as “unworthily.” It is an adverb describing the action being taken, not an adjective describing the person. What is this “unworthy manner” in which a person becomes guilty of the body and blood of the Lord? Is it taking the Supper as a sinner? Absolutely not! No one would be able to take the Supper. The Supper is obviously for sinners. Generally it is living a life that is inconsistent with the self-sacrificial nature of Christ’s offering. It is being impenitently selfish. Specifically for the Corinthians this meant acting selfishly within the body, creating divisions within the church. Taking the Lord’s Supper in an unworthy manner does not deal with whether or not you have had a bad thought this week (although you should confess this). It deals with how you are *acting*. The exhortations don’t focus on what is going on in the recesses of our hearts. We are not admonished according to our feelings at the time of taking the Supper. The exhortation within the context has to do with how the people are treating one another when they gather in order to participate in the Lord’s Supper. Paul is saying that if you are a selfish pig (a little reformed Jewish humor), then you are taking the Supper in a manner that is inconsistent with the meaning of the Supper itself. In this a person or an entire church profanes the death of our Lord and becomes guilty of betraying Christ!

Therefore, we should examine ourselves or “prove” ourselves. This is what he goes on to say in 11.28: “But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup.” The word translated “examine” is a word that Paul has been using to deal with those who believed they are “the approved ones.” These are the arrogant cusses who have been causing the divisions. Paul says that these people need to prove themselves by not causing divisions within the body.

It should be carefully noted that the focus of this entire passage is *not* who is allowed and who is not allowed to the Table but how the people of God are to act when we come to the Table. Nowhere do we read of Paul saying, “Don’t take the Lord’s Supper.” But rather (essentially), “Repent of the way you have been observing the Supper and observe it correctly.” Paul is not dealing here with barring people from the Table (as he did in 1Corinthians 5 where it is quite clear). He is dealing with the repentance and faithful living of those who come to the Table. He is to prove himself and *then eat and drink*.

A warning is then issued for those who participate unworthily: “For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body.” Paul reiterates the warning about eating and drinking in an unworthy manner. He says that he eats and drinks judgment to himself, “not discerning the Lord’s body.” While some have taken this to mean “they don’t understand the *physical* body of the Lord” or “they don’t understand the presence of Christ in the Supper,” I think there is an easier explanation for this that fits better with the context.

“The Lord’s body” refers to the church, the church of God that many of them had been despising (cf. 11.22). To despise the church, the body of Christ, is to despise Christ himself. The Supper is not about individuals sealed off from the rest of the community. The Supper is about the community. So much so that if you, like the arrogant Corinthians, are more concerned about yourself in the Supper than everyone else around you, then you are not observing the Supper properly.

Paul continues in 11.30-31: “For this reason many *are* weak and sick among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged.” Judgment has fallen on many in Corinth because of their profaning the Lord’s death. This coincides with the example



that Paul gave them of the children of Israel, “our fathers” (cf. 10.1ff), who ate and drank and were then judged by God. Instead, we are to “judge ourselves” so that we will not be judged. If we deal with the problems in which we are engaged, then we would not be judged by God.

Then the Corinthians are given some relative comfort in 11.32: “But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world.” God disciplines us as his children so that we will not be condemned with the world. By the way, this is the positive outcome of the discipline in the Supper and one reason you should *not* exclude yourself from it by absence or refusing it when it is passed. Go ahead and take what’s coming to you (Heb 12). Take your spanking and be thankful for it.

“Therefore, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. But if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, lest you come together for judgment. And the rest I will set in order when I come.” (11.33-34) Now, at the close of the passage, Paul ties up his exhortation concerning the Supper and the Corinthian problems with it. “Therefore” indicates that a conclusion is being drawn. Here is the conclusion and the exhortation concerning eating in a worthy manner: “when you come together to eat, *wait for one another.*” I think it is quite telling that in summing up what he is saying about eating the Lord’s Supper in an unworthy manner Paul does *not* go into a discourse about intellectual activity of thinking about Christ’s physical body or the real presence of Christ in communion (which is assumed because there is judgment and blessing going on). He says—as has been his focus—“wait for one another.” Act like the church. Act like the one body of Christ that you are. This is the point: be unselfish. If you are hungry, eat at home so that you don’t come together for judgment (implied: instead of blessing).

At the conclusion of this I must ask the question: In our day and age, who is dividing the church? Our baptized children or the adults who do not recognize them as a part of the body of Christ? Who is not “rightly discerning the Lord’s body?” Our children who recognize that they are not being included or the adults who refuse to recognize them as members of this one loaf? Many Reformed folks must indeed examine themselves in light of the nature of Christ’s body.

There is nothing in this passage that forbids children from coming to the Table. This passage is dealing with the people who are causing problems within the church, not whether or not children are to be admitted to the Table. While there are some points at which anti-paedocommunionists will raise several objections based upon inference from the commands given in this passage, those objections viewed within this context are answered quite easily. This is something to which we will turn our attention presently.

## **OBJECTIONS TO PAEDOCOMMUNION FROM 1 CORINTHIANS 11.17-34**

### **PART 2: ANSWERING OBJECTIONS**

1Corinthians 11 is supposed to be the “Achilles heel” for those who believe in covenant communion. But as we learned, the passage flows with the stream of the context which is concerned mainly about the unity of the church, *not* about who is admitted and not admitted to the Lord’s Supper. It is in their practice of the Lord’s Supper that the divisions of the Corinthian church find their greatest and most hypocritical expression. That which is to signify our unity as the church in Christ has become the stage for certain people to showcase themselves. Instead of living in a manner consistent with the self-sacrifice of Christ as revealed in the very words of institution, the Corinthian Christians are being selfish. These are the actions which bring the judgment of God upon them. Paul tells them to repent of these actions and take the Supper in a worthy manner; i.e., in unity.

Although the passage is directed to the scoundrels who are dividing the body of Christ with their selfish actions, anti-paedocommunionists say that the commands and/or exhortations in this passage somehow stand as prerequisites for anyone to come to the Table. Since children supposedly cannot step across this invisible, nebulous, and, thus, undefined threshold of admittance, they are not to be allowed to the Table. Although their arguments seem strong on their face, when examined within this particular context and the general context and tenor of the rest of Scripture, they are, in fact, weak. Indeed, I believe that the anti-paedocommunionist's approach to this passage reveals a blatant pre-disposition against children coming to the Table. These exhortations and/or commands in this passage must be wrenched from the context and forced into a pre-composed system of thought in which the person is committed to the anti-covenant communion position. Let's look at the objections.

### THE "REMEMBRANCE" ARGUMENT

It is said, "Jesus said to do this 'in remembrance of me.' Since small children do not have the intellectual capacity to 'recollect,' they do not have the right to come to the Table." Although this is not the strongest argument used from this passage, it is used. This command is found in the words of institution when Jesus says after the bread and the cup, "Do this in remembrance of me" (cf. 11:24, 25). This argument does not stand scrutiny when left within the context of covenant meals or any sort of covenant "remembrance" activity.

#### *The Lord's Supper is a memorial meal*<sup>11</sup>

While the translation "do this in remembrance of me" is technically correct and can stand if it is understood within the context of covenant meals, "do this as my memorial" clarifies more what Jesus is saying. The Lord's Supper stands in the line of redemptive history which is filled with this type of language of memorial. One of the problems that arises from the traditional translation is that we have a tendency to import our understanding of "remembering" into the text. "Remembering" is pre-defined for us so that when we come across it in the text we automatically pigeon-hole this activity into our narrow understanding of "recollecting some historical event." I am not saying that this meaning is necessarily foreign to the concept of a memorial—in fact I think it is part of it within a particular context—but I am saying I do not think that this is the *primary* concept involved in what Jesus is saying.

A memorial in the Scriptures (normally) involves some kind of sign which God sees and remembers His covenant with His people, determining to act in behalf of their deliverance and the destruction of their enemies. Memorials included sacrifices, offerings, meals, feasts, blood on the doorposts in Egypt, and other activities and items listed throughout Scripture. In continuation with this redemptive history and summing up redemptive history in himself, our Lord Jesus proclaims that this meal is his memorial. It is in the practice of the Lord's Supper that God "sees" us partake of the bread and wine, he hears our prayers, and he remembers his covenant with us in Christ. This memorial meal is not *primarily* about an individual's cognitive activity of recollecting historical facts. Rather, it is about God's remembering and acting in behalf of his

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<sup>11</sup>If the reader is interested in studying the nature of memorials in Scripture, he may refer to Joachim Jeremias' book, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*. It is rather technical, but the book provides good evidence that the nature of the Eucharist or Lord's Supper was as I describe it here: a memorial meal in the Scriptural sense.

people.

One of the clearest memorial signs in Scripture occurs just after the worldwide flood in the days of Noah. When Noah, his family, and all the animals disembarked, Noah offered an offering. YHWH smelled the offering, was pleased, and started making promises. One of the promises that he made was that he would “place his bow in the clouds.” This was a “sign of the covenant” (Gen 9.12). Then, when God sees his bow in the cloud, he will remember his covenant between Noah and every living creature, and he will act according to his promises: he will not flood the earth (Gen 9.8-17). The signs of God’s covenant were primarily for *his* remembrance.

In the OC all of the feasts, sacrifices, and festivals were considered to be memorials. In the appointed feasts, in fact, there were two silver trumpets that were to be blown to mark the beginning of these feasts. Hear what God has to say concerning these in Numbers 10.10: “Also in the day of your gladness, in your appointed feasts, and at the beginning of your months, you shall blow the trumpets over your ascension offerings and over the sacrifices of your peace offerings; *and they shall be a memorial* for you before your God: I *am* YHWH your God.”

All of the feasts in the OC were memorials before the Lord. Even if we grant to those who oppose paedocommunion that children did not participate in Passover (which I am not willing to concede based on the evidence), we still have clear evidence that they did participate in other OC feasts such as the Feast of Weeks and Tabernacles. (Deut 16:11, 14)

We also learned that Paul equates all the sacrifices/sacrificial meals of the OC with the Lord’s Supper in 1 Corinthians 10.18. We know that children participated in meals such as the peace offerings as well as others. If they participated in these “memorial” or “remembrance” meals in the OC, why should they be prohibited from participating in the NC “memorial” or “remembrance” meal?

The language of “remembrance” does not give us a *prerequisite* for admittance to the Table (i.e., “You must be able to cognitively recollect certain historical facts”). Rather this language gives us the *purpose* of the meal itself: it is a memorial before the Lord (cf. Gallant, *Feed My Lambs*, 85).

***“Remembrance” within the covenant community is not beyond the ability of small children.***

Memorial language, though primarily directed toward God, does not exclude the remembering of God’s people concerning his saving activity. God’s people are to remember what God has done, but they are to do so as a community. One problem in using this “remembrance argument” against individual children participating in the Lord’s Supper is that “remembering” can most certainly be understood as a community remembering. We have an example of this in the Ten Commandments in which we are told to “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.” We are to *memorialize* the Sabbath day. This covenant obligation rested upon the entire community and each individual in particular. All of God’s people were to cease their regular six-day labor and rest on the Sabbath. The language of the command says that not only were the heads of households to “remember” the Sabbath, but also sons, daughters, man servants, maid servants, and animals (cf. Exod 20.8ff.). “Remembering” in this context was “observing” all that God had commanded; i.e., ceasing from labor and worshipping God. So then, “remembering” language does not explicitly or by implication exclude children from participating in the Lord’s Supper. Indeed, the “remembering” language in the Bible proves just the opposite: children are to participate in these activities.

## THE SELF-EXAMINATION ARGUMENT

The argument is basically stated like this: “Paul says that a person must ‘examine himself’ and then eat of the bread and drink of the cup (11:28). Since small children are not able to examine themselves, then they cannot eat of the bread and drink of the cup.” This argument again fails the scrutiny of the context as well as the general experience of life.

### *Children are able to examine themselves on a particular level*

Anyone who has been a child knows that this is the case if you but think about it. You know this especially if you have children. Children are able to distinguish between right and wrong and they can evaluate their actions. Granted, this evaluation is quite immature, but it is there nevertheless. How many crawling babies have looked back at their parents just before they touch something that they have been told not to touch, seeing if they can get away with it this time? Are they not “examining” and making judgments about their actions when they do this? If they are not able to examine themselves, making judgments between right and wrong, you have no right to impose corrective discipline on them when they disobey, because they do not understand it as disobedience.

The mere ability to “examine” and make certain value judgments cannot be used as the threshold for entrance to the Table because children can do this. Granted, there are certain things that children cannot do until they are more mature and can make more mature judgments. Children should not be able to vote in congregational meetings because they are not able to reason through and make sound judgments. Children cannot be officers in the church because this requires a certain level of maturity. Children should not be given guns, knives, or any kind of contraband to play with until they are mature enough to handle them. But the Lord’s Supper is not like any one of these things. It is a meal. It is food. And as such it is the staple of life and can be appreciated even by the immature.

### *“Examine” could be “prove” and might very well be referring to the corrected visible actions of those who were promoting schism in the church.*

As we examined in the last section, the issue that was before Paul was the fact that there were people who were causing divisions within the body of Christ. Before these people came to the Table they were to repent of their actions *proving themselves* before the church as promoting unity and not causing division.

The anti-paedocommunionists say that it is the ability to examine oneself that determines whether or not a person eats in a manner that is worthy. The problem with this is that *this is not what the text says*. In this context eating in an unworthy manner has to do with being divisive within the body of Christ, *not the ability to examine oneself*. Self-examination and/or proving oneself is a preventative for those who are already eating the Supper in an unworthy manner. The command that follows this command to “examine yourselves” tells us that this command is not some “admittance requirement.” He says, “examine” yourself and in this way let him eat of that bread and drink of that cup. The point of the passage is *right participation in the Supper*, not admittance requirements or exclusion from the Supper (which, in Biblical terms is excommunication).

***Commands given to the people of God as a whole are not prohibitive for the inclusion of children, especially in covenant rites.***

If anybody should recognize this truth it should be those people who are in the Reformed community. But at this point many Reformed folks resort to the arguments used by Baptists against our practice of giving children the covenant sign of baptism. When we absolutize every command of Scripture to apply to every person in the same exact way we run into serious problems. This is not only true for Baptists and their rejection of covenant baptism, but it is also true in many other areas also. The Scriptures tell us in 2Thessalonians 3.10, “For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat.” The command is clear enough, isn’t it? It is not if “any man” will not work. It is “anyone.” Resorting to Greek will not help you here either. The word translated “any” is an indefinite pronoun that is properly reflected in our English translation. There you have it. Little babies can’t work, so they should not be able to eat. The physically or mentally handicapped cannot work, so they shouldn’t eat. Many elderly cannot work, so they shouldn’t eat.

Is that what Paul is saying? Absolutely not! The command is directed to those who are capable of working and responsible for working who are refusing to work. The command is not given for “every single person” in the entire world. In fact, in light of other Scripture we find that we are to care for our children, for the helpless, and for the elderly. These commands must be kept in the larger context of the whole of Scripture and must be interpreted in light of them.

The Bible also says, “Whoever calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Rom 10.13). There you have it. If you do not call upon God then you can’t be saved. So what do you do about the dumb (i.e., mute)? Can they not be saved because they cannot speak? What about the children who die in infancy? Can they not be saved because they cannot yet articulate faith in God? No sane interpreter that I know takes this position because it is untenable in the light of the rest of Scripture.

Dealing more with the covenant ritual context, we read the commands given in Isaiah 1. After condemning the actions of His people’s inconsistent worship, God speaks through Isaiah: “Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; Put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil, Learn to do good; Seek justice, Rebuke the oppressor; Defend the fatherless, Plead for the widow.” (Isa 1.16-17) In this section of Scripture God is condemning all of the feasts and worship of His people. Now we know that children participated in any and all of these things in the OC. So then, was God giving commands to the small children to “seek justice, rebuke the oppressor, defend the fatherless,” and “plead for the widow”? Or was he directing these commands at those who were guilty of the crimes of inconsistent worship? The latter most certainly. These commands given are for those to whom they apply. So it is in the Corinthian context. Paul is speaking to those people who are being divisive and anyone who might be divisive in the future.

**THE “DISCERNING THE LORD’S BODY” ARGUMENT**

Here is the argument: “Paul says that those who partake of the Lord’s Supper must be able to ‘discern the Lord’s body,’ which is the body with which he died. Since children do not have the ability to discern the Lord’s physical body in this way, they should not be allowed to eat at the Lord’s Table.” The text reads like this in 1Corinthians 11.29: “For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body.”

Eating and drinking in an unworthy manner and bringing judgment upon oneself is associated with not discerning the Lord's body. But the question here is, To what is Paul referring to when he refers to the "Lord's body?"

It has been said that within this particular context the "Lord's body" has been referred to already—11.24, 27—and these refer to the "Person" of Christ and his body specifically. Therefore, it follows that this reference found in 11.28 refers to the Lord's physical body and cannot refer to the church. There are a couple of observations that reveal this objection to be untenable.

***The context is broader than these verses and Paul has already made reference to the "body of Christ" as referring to the church.***

Paul dealt with this in 10.16-17, which context provides the foundation for what is being said in our present context. There we read: "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we, *though* many, are one bread *and* one body; for we all partake of that one bread." Here Paul makes the free association of the bread with *both* the physical body of Christ and the church. Those who seek to make the passage in chapter 11 refer only to the physical body of Christ do not adequately take into account the larger context nor Paul's exchange between Christ's body, his physical body, and Christ's body, the church. As is indicated in this context, Paul does not separate the two in a hard-and-fast way like those who want us to meditate on the physical body of Christ. When a person sins against the church he sins against Christ himself. How could a person sin against the church, the body of Christ, and not be guilty of betraying Christ? This hard-and-fast distinction between Christ and the church is an unbiblical formulation and can lead to all sorts of error concerning one's relationship with Christ over against one's relationship with the church ... something which Paul is fighting here. In fact, Paul is telling them that their relationship with Christ is directly affected by their treating one another the way they are treating one another. Discerning the Lord's body is referring to discerning rightly the church, the body of Christ.

***The language used concerning "discerning the Lord's body" is distinctively different than the sacramental language used throughout the text.***

Throughout this text Paul refers to the Corinthian participation in the sacrament as "eating the bread and drinking the cup." Even when speaking about the "Person of Christ" (if this all can be distinguished from the church as some do. I am not willing to grant it), the terms "body and blood" are coupled together. For instance, in 11.26 "For as often as you *eat this bread and drink this cup*, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes." Then in 11.27, "Therefore whoever *eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord* in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the *body and blood of the Lord*." Followed by 11.28: "But let a man examine himself, and so let him *eat of the bread and drink of the cup*." Then finally in 11.29: "For he who *eats and drinks* in an unworthy manner *eats and drinks* judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body." Paul does not say, "not discerning the Lord's body and blood," but simply "not discerning the Lord's body." What the guilty parties are not discerning is the relationship that the church should have with one another.

I think this is further proven by the summation exhortation that Paul gives in 11.33: "Therefore, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another." He does not say,

“You all need to learn how to contemplate the physical body of Christ so that you can eat in a worthy manner.” Rather, he tells them “wait for one another,” implying from the context that this is how they will eat in a worthy manner.

A closing note on this point: Many children are able to “discern the Lord’s body” better than many adults. No doubt this is on a different maturity level, but it is discernment nevertheless. When the bread and wine pass by and they are not able to participate, we are telling them, “You are not a part of the Lord’s body.” And that they understand all too well.

### THE “PROCLAMATION” ARGUMENT

“Paul says that as often as we eat this bread and drink this cup we proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. Children cannot proclaim the Lord’s death, so they should not be able to participate.” This is not one of the stronger objections, but it is out there so I will deal with it.

This actually goes back to the section on the Supper being a memorial meal. The proclamation is not an individual’s proclamation just as the Supper is not an individual sacrament. The proclamation is that of Christ and His people in the very action of eating and drinking together that proclaims the Lord’s death. The proclamation is not some conscious and/or articulate proclamation of which Paul is speaking. God’s people are proclaiming the death of Christ to the Father so that He will remember His covenant and act in our behalf. “Proclaiming the Lord’s death” does not exclude the children any more than they can be excluded from any other memorial meal.

### CLOSING OBSERVATIONS CONCERNING THE OBJECTIONS FROM 1CORINTHIANS 11

I believe those brothers who object to paedocommunion using 1Corinthians 11 are well-meaning. We simply disagree on what Paul is seeking to accomplish in the passage. I ask you take into consideration some of the implications of this position. First, *those who are anti-paedocommunion make intellectual incapability or immaturity equal to rebellion against God.* They fear judgment falling on the children because they do not have these capabilities. But where are these physical or mental incapacibilities ever equivalent to rebellion against God in Scripture? Where in Scripture does God judge someone, especially his own children, *on the basis* of their mental and/or physical incapacibilities? Incapability or immaturity is not equal to rebellion. God will not judge the immature or incapable. He will judge the rebellious.

Second, *1Corinthians 11 has nothing do with barring children from the Table.* In fact, this passage has nothing to do with barring *anyone* from the Table, even adults. Barring someone from the Table in Biblical language is excommunication as Paul dealt with in chapter 5. The passage before us has nothing to do with barring people from the Table but how those who come to the Table are to act.

Last, *the connection of this passage with 1Corinthians 10 tells us that the mature are the ones who stand the great danger of being judged for unworthy participation, not the children.* The illustration that Paul uses of the children of Israel in the wilderness in chapter 10 is an illustration of how the older generation came under God’s judgment because of living inconsistently with their covenant obligations. Indeed, it was the younger generation that survived the judgment and went on to inherit the promised land!

I do not doubt the sincerity of those who oppose paedocommunion. They believe that they are protecting their children from judgment. But as kindly and as graciously as I can say it, I

believe their zeal is not according to knowledge on this issue. Their fear is based upon a faulty reading of commands and not taking into account larger contexts that shed light upon the issue. Their fear is not justified. As any good father, our heavenly Father feeds his children. When we don't feed his children, we are misrepresenting their heavenly Father. May God help us.