

**THE CASE FOR
COVENANT COMMUNION**

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FOREWORD

THIS BOOK CONTAINS A NUMBER OF arguments in favor of paedocommunion, and they are competently marshaled and ably argued by a number of godly men. My purpose here is not to try to anticipate those arguments, but rather to try to stir in you, the reader, a desire to hope that it might all be true. The Bereans were more noble than the Jews in Thessalonica, as we have all heard many times (Acts 17:11). But there are two reasons given for that nobility. One, of course, was that they searched the Scriptures to see if the word brought by the apostles was true. We are the heirs of the magisterial Reformers, and so we want to ground everything we believe and do in the absolutes of God's Word. But the second reason given by Luke for their nobility is that they received the Word with great eagerness. This is a good model for us. We ought not to be gullible, believing whatever happens to strike our fancy. But neither are we to be cranky, refusing to receive any new blessing from the Scriptures.

We are to search the Scriptures to verify what we are being taught. And if the teaching glorifies and exalts the kindness and greatness of God, demonstrates the abundance of His grace, and in every other respect appears too good to be true, we should receive it with shrewd eagerness. This kind of eagerness is not blind—we are still to double-check it all against the text. But we do so with a prayer: “Oh, dear Lord, how wonderful this would be . . .”

And I want to mention one reason why these arguments, if scripturally persuasive, would be wonderful news indeed. I am a minister of a church which practices weekly communion. We follow the covenant renewal pattern in worship, which means (among other things) that the service culminates each week in our observance of the Supper. In addition to the sermon, I deliver a short homily and exhortation in the administration of the Supper. That exhortation is to the point and just takes a few minutes. But the central theme I have sought to emphasize is that the Lord is pleased with His people, delights over them with singing, rejoices to commune with them in the Eucharistic celebration. I have found, as a result of exhorting the saints this way, that many of them have had trouble adjusting to it. They have been taught a completely different view of the Supper.

They think of the Supper as a time of introspection and self-examination. It is time to confess sins and to try to make things right. In some cases, the Supper turns into a time of morbid or pathological introspection, and it is easy for believers to think that they have the right

INTRODUCTION

THE BATTLE IS OVER, AND IN THE GREAT dining hall the feast is prepared. It is grand. The linens adorn a table in settings of gold and silver. The wine is the finest vintage. All of the king's house is present. The nobility, the generals, and the heirs await the toast. The king is seated at the head of the table, but has a troubled look.

"Is there anyone left in the enemy's house?" asks the king.
"No, my lord, the enemy has been vanquished," answers a general.
"But wait, there is one man left," he remembers, "but he is no threat to you, my lord."
"Where is he? What is his name?" insists the king.
"We will get him, sir. My men will . . ."
"No," says the king. "I want him alive. What is his name?"
"His name is Mephibosheth."

No doubt you know of the story of lame Mephibosheth (2 Sam. 9:1–13). He was the son of Saul's son, Jonathan. David's question was, "Is there still anyone who is left of the house of Saul, that I may show him kindness for Jonathan's sake?" (2 Sam. 9:1). The last verse of the story reminds us that "Mephibosheth dwelt in Jerusalem, for he ate continually at the king's table. And he was lame in both his feet" (2 Sam. 9:13).

All who find themselves at the table of the Lord are like Mephibosheth. We are lame. Sometimes we pretend that we stand up on our own two feet and make a place at the table for ourselves. But, in truth, we must be carried there if we are to be seated. And Jesus does carry us. He lifts us from our deformity and seats us with Him, though we are unworthy.

It is in light of this grace of our Lord Jesus that I invite you to see the Lord's table as communion with a King who seats us as a congregation of lame Mephibosheths. I believe this leads us to permit all baptized children as qualified for the table by covenant membership. This is what is called paedocommunion.

Our Baptist brethren object to the whole package. Not only to children at communion, but bringing children to the water of baptism. Growing up as a Baptist, I was frequently reminded of the need for conversion testimonies of salvation. I heard an ex-con drug addict standing in the waters of baptism, explaining how she was saved. It is powerful to hear and see dramatic changes in a person's life. How could the baptism of a little child compare to this?

The last baby that I baptized was little Addelynn. As an infant, she

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A PRESBYTERIAN DEFENSE OF PAEDOCOMMUNION

ROBERT S. RAYBURN

I AM A SON OF THE COVENANT.¹ I GREW UP the loyal son of a Reformed and Presbyterian home. I was taught the catechism as a boy and I believed it. As I came into young adulthood I had occasion to put some of that teaching to the test. I satisfied my mind, for example, that the doctrine of divine sovereignty, which I had been taught as a boy, was not only the unequivocal teaching of Holy Scripture, but also the necessary implication of the Bible's theology, its doctrine of God. Through my college and seminary years I examined for myself and settled my mind concerning some other doctrines that lie near the heart of that theological system that we have inherited from the magisterial reformers, the British and Dutch

1. Editor's note: This chapter originally appeared as the text to a debate on paedocommunion between Dr. Rayburn and Dr. Kenneth Gentry, as part of the Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary's Spring Theology Conference in 2004 and was published in *The Covenant: God's Voluntary Condescension* (Taylors, SC: Presbyterian Press, 2005). Permission for use here was graciously granted by the author and the seminary. The reader is encouraged to read Dr. Gentry's presentation in the above text, as well as listen to the recorded debate (available at WordMp3.com).

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PRESBYTERIAN, EXAMINE THYSELF: RESTORING CHILDREN TO THE TABLE

JEFFREY J. MEYERS

*The bread which we break, is it not a communion in the body of Christ?
Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we
all partake of one bread. 1 Corinthians 10:16b-17*

CONFESSONAL PRESBYTERIAN THEOLOGIANS and pastors traditionally cite 1 Corinthians 11:28 as *the* argument against those who want to restore our young covenant children to the Lord's table: "A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup" (NIV). They suppose that this text demands a certain level of intellectual competence as well as a capacity to engage in mature, self-conscious introspection, both of which, we are told, small children, especially infants, do not possess. Therefore, since children are not able to "examine themselves" before partaking, they cannot be allowed access to the Lord's table. If they are permitted to commune too soon, and they don't understand what is going on in the sacrament, they will "eat and drink judgment upon themselves" (1 Cor. 11:29). Although this interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11:28 seems to have attained the status of infallible tradition in Protestantism, there are good reasons to question this understanding of 1 Corinthians 11 and the practice of excluding the weakest members of the body of Christ from

partaking of the Lord's family Supper.

John Calvin's argument against communing young children stands or falls with this argument:

[The Lord] does not . . . hold forth the Supper for all to partake of, but only for those who are capable of discerning the body and blood of the Lord, of examining their own conscience, of proclaiming the Lord's death, and of considering its power. Do we wish anything plainer than the apostle's teaching when he exhorts each man to prove and search himself, then to eat of this bread and drink of this cup? A self-examination, therefore ought to come first, and it is vain to expect this of infants . . . Why should we offer poison instead of life-giving food to our tender children? (*Institutes*, 4.16.30)

This line of reasoning has been repeated over and over again in churches that are part of the Reformation tradition. Sometimes it appears to be taken for granted as "common sense" in modern conservative Presbyterian circles. But does 1 Corinthians 11:28 really require the kind of self-examination that Calvin and Presbyterians have traditionally thought? To whom does Paul address this admonition? What does the verb "examine" mean in the context of 1 Corinthians 11? Does it actually require "mature faith" and an ability to perform internal soul-searching and deep personal introspection before one can be judged worthy of participation at the Lord's table? I am convinced that this text has been made to serve a function in traditional discussions about the admission requirements for Holy Communion that goes well beyond Paul's solution for the problem in the Corinthian church's practice of the Supper. More ominously, I am convinced that this text, properly understood, actually stands *against* the traditional Presbyterian practice of excluding young children from the table. Those who fail to commune the youngest, weakest members of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:14–26) are themselves not "judging the body" (that is, *the church* as the communal body of Christ) and are therefore eating the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner. If this is true, then traditional Presbyterian theologians and pastors need to examine themselves if they are going to avoid eating and drinking judgment on themselves (1 Cor. 11:29).

EACH PERSON MUST PROVE HIMSELF

Let us begin with the command in 1 Corinthians 11:28. The Greek verb Paul uses here is *dokimazō*, which means "to prove, approve, or test." To bring out the meaning of this word in context, it may be best to translate 1 Corinthians 11:28 as follows: "Let a man prove himself and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup." This is how *dokimazō* is normally used in Paul's

writings (see, for example, 1 Corinthians 3:13; 2 Corinthians 13:5). It does not typically refer to a self-reflexive *internal* act of evaluation; rather, it has to do with “proving” or “approving” something or someone, often publicly or at least in relation to others. Consider, for example, Paul’s warning to ministers: “. . . each one’s work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will prove [*dokimazō*] what sort of work each one has done” (1 Cor. 3:13; see also 1 Thess. 2:4; 1 Pet. 1:7). And again, his instructions at the end of his epistle: “And when I arrive, I will send those whom you accredit [*dokimazō*] by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem” (1 Cor. 16:3 [ESV]; see also 2 Cor. 8:8, 22).

How then does a man “prove” himself? In the immediate context of 1 Corinthians 10–12 the “proof” that a Christian must display is his or her *behavior* at the table with respect to the *unity* of the body of Christ and *not* the performance of introspective self-examination. A man “proves himself” by *how* he eats, not how much he understands or how thoroughly he searches his heart. Understanding and heart-searching may be involved, but the proof is in *the way one behaves* toward others in the body of Christ.

There are those in the Corinthian church whose *behavior* in the church and especially at the Lord’s table manifests selfish pride and therefore divisiveness. They are *living* in relation to others in the body of Christ in a manner that destroys the unity of the church; and they are *doing* the Lord’s Supper in a way that visibly violates one of its defining purposes. The table ought to symbolize and constitute the people of God as *one*. As Paul said earlier, one loaf equals one body (1 Cor. 10:17). A Christian “proves himself” when he behaves as a loving member of the body of Christ, avoiding divisive and schismatic behavior, especially at the communion [*koinōnia*] table.

1 Corinthians 11:17–18, therefore, is a rebuke and warning to the Corinthian Christians for what they were *not* doing; they refused to wait for one another at the Lord’s Supper, even going so far as to eat their own private cliquish or family meals (1 Cor. 11:20–22, 33–34). This *way of eating* the Lord’s Supper had the effect of dividing the body, and since the rich were using the table as an occasion for a feast with their rich friends, the weaker, poorer members of the body were being treated as second-class Christians. Paul’s rebuke is pointed and has little, if anything, to do with their intellectual capacity to understand some theory relating the presence of Christ in the bread and wine: “Do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?” (1 Cor. 11:22).

THE IMMEDIATE CONTEXT — THEIR MISBEHAVIOR AT THE TABLE

That Paul admonishes each of them to prove, *by their behavior at the table*, their unity with Christ and with one another, fits perfectly with the thrust of his

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THE TESTIMONY OF THE ANCIENT CHURCH

BLAKE PURCELL

PAEDOCOMMUNION HAS BEEN AND CONTINUES to be the practice of all the ancient bodies of Eastern Christianity. But since the 1200's, Western Christendom has been debating the question of how and why children should be allowed to the Lord's table. In about 1418, "Good King Wenceslas" faced 50,000 Hussite men in Bohemia who were willing to fight and die before they would see their infant children suspended from Holy Communion. The Hussites denounced those "who have allowed their own will to triumph, rather than the authority of Scripture, in the matter of infant communion."¹ King Wenceslas was so alarmed he made major concessions to the Hussites.

One of the grand traditions of the Reformation faith, in all three of its major denominational expressions—Lutheran, Episcopalian and Reformed—is its attitude toward church history. Alister McGrath puts it this way: "The magisterial Reformation (Lutheran and Reformed churches) was theologically conservative . . . Equally, it is hardly surprising that *we find the*

1. David R. Holeton, "The Communion of Infants and Hussitism" in *Communio Viatorum* 27 (Prague: Charles University, 1984), 27:4:216.

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THE POLEMICS OF INFANT COMMUNION

GREGG STRAWBRIDGE

THE MATTER OF CHILDREN AT COMMUNION evokes strong convictions on both sides of the practice (inclusion and exclusion). Currently, paedocommunion is not the received tradition of the West, generally, nor of Reformed and Presbyterian traditions specifically.¹ Nevertheless, from the third century there is much evidence showing that the Western church regularly communed little children, and, even in the last few decades, a growing number of Reformed churches and officers have embraced the practice.²

1. This title is meant to call to mind B. B. Warfield's excellent article "The Polemics of Infant Baptism" answering the Baptist theologian A. H. Strong's anti-paedobaptist arguments.

2. G. I. Williamson (OPC) and Robert Rayburn (PCA) led study committees and produced substantial defenses of the practice. Beyond those from the CREC, PCA, CRC, and the REC within this book, other prominent paedocommunionists include N. T. Wright (Anglican), William Willimon (United Methodist), and, of course, there are several traditions practicing paedocommunion, such as Eastern Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Reformed Episcopalian (discretion of local church), Evangelical Catholic Church (which subscribes to the Formula of Concord), much of Anglicanism, and some Lutherans.

APPENDIX

THE PRESBYTERIAN DOCTRINES OF COVENANT CHILDREN, COVENANT NURTURE, AND COVENANT SUCCESSION

ROBERT S. RAYBURN

*[Editor's Note: Are you saying that covenant children are saved? Will our children go to heaven? Is there a guarantee that covenant children are elect? No doubt, these questions arise. Upon an initial consideration of paedocommunion by evangelicals, our concern is for authentic relationship with Christ, and, at the same time, an assurance of a faith kept to the second generation. Such questions of a practical, pastoral, and familial nature are important and should be answered by a study of the biblical doctrine of covenant succession. I am grateful, then, to commend this truly classic article on this subject. In providing this, the editor and publisher acknowledge a debt of gratitude to Robert A. Peterson, editor of *Presbyterion* and the *Presbyterion* committee, for permission to republish Robert S. Rayburn's article, "The Presbyterian Doctrines of Covenant Children, Covenant Nurture, and Covenant Succession," as it originally appeared in *Presbyterion* 22.2 (Fall 1996), 76–112. This permission was granted on the condition that we also include the original appendix to the article by V. Philips Long, then editor of the journal.]*

ONE OF THE FEATURES OF PRESBYTERIAN thought and life which ought most dramatically to distinguish it from the prevailing evangelicalism is its view of the church's children. That even evangelical Presbyterianism is not clearly differentiated in this way is, in my judgment, one of the saddest and most dangerous consequences of the debasement of our theology in both pulpit and pew. I do not hesitate to say that there has been such a debasement in respect to the doctrine of covenant succession—i.e., that set of truths connected with the purpose of God that his saving grace should run in the lines of generations—and that this debasement has resulted in Presbyterian people being robbed of one of the most precious parts of their inheritance.

There are various indications that the doctrine of covenant succession in its various parts is either imperfectly understood or misunderstood. I have noticed as a pastor, in countless interviews for church membership, the assumption on the part of many who have grown up in Presbyterian churches that it is nevertheless expected that they should know when and how they were converted. Very often, upon further reflection, these same people are quite willing to admit that what they had counted as their conversion may not, in fact, have been the beginning of their new life in Christ, and that they may well have been Christians long before. I have myself listened to more than a few Presbyterian sermons devoted to one aspect or another of this truth only to be dismayed by how far