

Proposed Presbytery *In thesi* Statement on Paedo-communion

The Presbytery of the Mississippi Valley considers paedo-communion as an “exception” to our doctrinal standards, not a “scruple” and out of accord with Scripture. The Presbytery is not willing to support the practice or inculcation of paedo-communion by our members.

The Presbytery of the Mississippi Valley expresses this judgment in light of the following.

1. Since the sixteenth century, the Reformed churches have been in almost universal agreement that the children of believing parents, even though they are within the covenant and are proper recipients of baptism, may not partake of the Lord’s Supper without embracing the covenant by previously professing their faith. The Reformers and their successors were well aware of that some Christians in the past had communed infants but, on biblical grounds, rejected this practice as errant and unscriptural. Though there has been a tiny smattering of dissent on this issue in the Reformed community over the last half millennium, no Reformed church (denomination) or any Reformed confession of any standing has ever embraced paedo-communion as the biblical view.

2. The witness of Christian history is not as clear on the matter of paedo-communion as it is on the matter of paedo-baptism. The present state of research indicates that the practice of infant communion is not as old as the practice of infant baptism. The earliest mention of paedo-communion is by Cyprian, but nothing in the voluminous writings of earlier fathers, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Hippolytus, says anything about infant communion; and Origen, writing some 16 years earlier than Cyprian, specifically states that children (*parvuli*) were not given communion.

Nevertheless, the “historical argument” for paedo-communion has been one of the most attractive parts of the revival of the argument for paedo-communion in the Reformed community over the last quarter century. The argument simply asserts that paedo-communion best accords with the ancient practice of the church. It is maintained that infant observance of the Lord’s Supper was wide-spread in the early church, but with the emergence of the doctrine of transubstantiation, a gradual cessation of the practice occurred. Besides citing the practice of the Eastern Orthodox Church, which practices both infant baptism and infant communion, claiming that it has done this since apostolic times, there are statements from Cyprian and Augustine that favor children’s communion. Many younger Reformed men, unaware of this strand of testimony, when introduced to it for the first time, are impressed by its very existence and lend it more weight than it warrants. The Reformers and their successors were fully aware of this historical evidence in the practice of the pre-Reformational churches (indeed far more aware than most Reformed ordinands, ministers and elders today) and yet judged the practice to be sub-scriptural.

3. In the last quarter century a tiny minority of voices has re-introduced this theological discussion in Reformed circles and has advocated for covenant children to partake of the Lord’s Supper on the basis of their baptism. It should be noted again that since that time no major conservative, evangelical, Bible-believing, Reformed denomination of standing has embraced these arguments as persuasive, or adopted this paedo-communion view as the biblical approach. Since that time, only a handful of competent Reformed theologians have embraced

this view, and the near-unanimous majority of the leading pastor-theologians in the conservative Reformed community reject the paedocommunion arguments as scripturally unconvincing.

4. The main theological argument advanced for paedocommunion is the parallel between baptismal recipients and Lord's Supper recipients, and is unpersuasive. This allows the paedocommunionist to appropriate all the classic Reformed arguments for the covenant membership of children and for paedobaptism, and then deploy them as part of the argument for paedocommunion. To restate, the principal theological argument for paedocommunion is based upon the covenant membership of children of believers. It is argued that the failure of Reformed churches to practice paedocommunion represents an inconsistency in their view of the covenant. Not surprisingly, those who have made this argument have often come from non- or anti-paedobaptist traditions, and it is not unfair to suggest that their structure of argument for paedocommunion is borrowed from the dispute with their own former tradition. (1) Since Baptists argue that the Reformed are inconsistent to baptize infants and yet not commune them, and (2) since many paedocommunion advocates come from or are primarily responding to the anti-paedobaptist tradition, and (3) since new "converts" to paedobaptism are often stung by the rhetorical force of the argument that paedobaptism is inconsistent with believers-only communion, and (4) since many new paedobaptists wrongly assume that the Reformers did not adequately consider this matter, (5) they consequently argue that the Reformed tradition needs to become biblically consistent and thus practice both paedobaptism and paedocommune, because of the theological symmetry and consistency of such a position.

In the wake of such an argument, one is sorely tempted to quote Emerson that "consistency is hobgoblin of little minds." However, the problem with this argument is that it fails. The paedocommunion position ignores: (1) the essential difference between the nature of sacramental participation in Baptism (in which the recipient is passive) and the Lord's Supper (in which the participant is active), (2) the essential distinction between a rite of initiation and inclusion (baptism) and a rite of communion and fellowship (the Lord's Supper), (3) and the role of faith in receiving the benefits signed and sealed in the Lord's Supper as the assuring meal of those in vital union with Christ. When paedocommunion advocates attempt to address these shortcomings they almost always end up promoting (1) a baptismal regeneration view, or an extreme and eccentric view of baptismal efficacy, (2) a defective view of the internal and external aspect of the covenant of grace, (3) a non-Reformed, non-Protestant, non-biblical view of apostasy.

5. Another key appeal for paedocommunion is the analogy between the Lord's Supper and the Passover is also unpersuasive. The pro-paedocommunionist argues that since children were allowed at the latter, they should be permitted to come to the former (Ex. 12:3-4; cf. Deut. 16:16,18,21). Advocates of paedocommunion also appeal to the analogy between the Lord's Supper and the covenant meals of the old covenant, which included the participation of children (cf. Deut. 16:11, 14). Then they argue that nothing is said in 1 Cor. 11:28-29 which necessitates the application of Paul's requirements to infants and children. The important thing to determine, they say, is to whom these statements and warnings are specifically addressed, for they need not be universally applied.

How do the Reformed reply to these arguments? First, by noting that there are some problems

with the appeal to the analogy between the Passover and the Lord's Supper. From the beginning it was recognized that future observances of the Passover would differ from the first. Women and children were to eat unleavened bread for seven days "in all your borders", i.e., at home wherever they were (Ex. 13:5-8; Deut. 16:4), while the men kept the full ritual of the Passover in the place where the Lord had chosen to place His name (Ex. 23:17; 34:23; Deut. 16:2,5-7,16ff.). Whether young children actually participated in the Passover meal prior to their reaching the age of 12 years is disputed. It is possible to be indifferent on this question and fully embrace the historic Reformed view and practice.

Second, the appeal to the participation of children in some of the OT feasts is not a strong argument. There were a variety of "conditions" for participation in the rites and ceremonies of the OT. Some meals were reserved to the priests and their families. The words of institution for the Lord's Supper have their background in the covenant meal that Moses shared (Ex. 24) with the elders of Israel. Many see the Lord's Supper prefigured in that meal as much as in the Passover meal; and they point out that also the Lord Himself referred to that meal when He quoted and transformed the words of Moses in Ex. 24:8 and applied them to His own blood: "this is My blood of the covenant" (Matt. 26:28). At the Last Supper, the disciples represented the new Israel and met with the Lord of the new covenant, sealing the new covenant to be established in His blood (Matt. 26:26).

Third, Paul clearly expresses certain cognitive, fiducial and ethical requirements for participation in the new covenant meal, the Lord's Supper. According to 1 Corinthians 11, participants in the Lord's Supper were to do so in remembrance of their Lord and what He had done in the sacrifice of Himself for their salvation. There is an emphasis upon a right frame of mind which properly discerns the meaning of Christ's sacrifice and its significance for the believer, as well as an emphasis on right relationship of believers to one another. These are activities which children incapable of a credible profession cannot yet properly fulfill. Paul's whole tendency of argument is against the direction of the modern paedocommunion argument. If children ought to commune simply on the basis of covenant membership, then why would Paul add conditions for adults to continue to commune? Paul seems to be ready to bar some adult members from the Lord's table, even though they are not under formal discipline, and to require all communing Christians to examine themselves in relation to the fulfillment of positive requirements in coming to the table. This hardly supports the tendency of current arguments for the covenantal basis of paedocommunion.

6. Current arguments for paedocommunion are frequently accompanied by extreme language charging the historic and current practice of the Reformed churches as "excommunicating" covenant children, starving our children of the means of grace, cutting them off from the covenant, withholding grace from them, and violating Paul's injunction to "discern the Lord's body." This kind of language is intemperate and unhelpful. As to the fact of the matter, however, withholding the Lord's Supper from children prior to their profession of faith does not jeopardize their receiving of any blessing of the covenant. For in administering baptism to children, while withholding the Lord's Supper from them prior to public profession of faith, we acknowledge that they are within the covenant. What is withheld from them is only another specific way whereby the promises of the covenant are signified and sealed – a specific way that is not yet suited to their time of life. The Lord's Supper, after all,

does not give any blessing which has not already been given in the Word and in baptism, by means of faith.

There are at least three considerations that argue in favor of continuing the historic Reformed practice in relation to communion: (1) the partaking of the Lord's Supper is an act of positive witness to one's faith in the truth of the gospel. Those who eat and drink: do so "in remembrance of their Lord" (I Cor 11:24, 25). Moreover, as they do so, they proclaim the benefits those united to Him receive (I Cor 11:26). All of this, therefore, consists of a confession of faith on the part of those participating in the Lord's Supper and points to a cordial and active acceptance of the gospel thus confessed. Consistency with this principle would demand the limitation of the Lord's Supper to the active communicant membership of the church.

(2) Since participation at the Lord's table is an active demonstration of the communicant's faith, self-examination is necessary before coming to the Lord's table. The Apostle Paul even tells us why this must be the case (I Cor 11:27-29). Such a proper discerning of the body requires a correct understanding of the gospel and all that it implies. And this, again, means a restriction of the second sacrament to those communicant members who alone qualify (I Cor. 11:31-32). Infants and non-professing children do not meet these apostolic and biblical requirements for "worthy" participation: self-examination (1 Cor. 11:28), and proper discernment of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 11:29). Cf. HC, Q. 81; BC, Art. 35; *WLC*, Q. 177.

(3) The Lord's Supper is not more effectual than the preaching of the Word. Yet one gets that impression from the theologizing of many in the pro-paedo-communion camp. Bavinck's point should be remembered, namely, that withholding the Lord's Supper is not the same as withholding the Word would be. For the divine means of imparting faith is the Word alone, while the Lord's Supper is an additional means to nourish and strengthen faith already imparted, as is also done by the Word. Therefore, let those who would actively participate in the second sacrament first give evidence of divinely imparted faith by means of a credible profession, and thereafter seek that divine means of grace supplied in the second sacrament that will more and more strengthen their faith and improve their lives.

In light of this, we may confidently say that there are no scriptural grounds for abandoning the Reformational practice of requiring a profession of faith by all who seek to take part in the sacramental means of grace of the Holy Supper, be they baptized children of the church or new converts.