

INFANT COMMUNION

COMMITTEE TO INVESTIGATE THE SITUATION AT WESTMINSTER SEMINARY IN REGARD TO INFANT COMMUNION

PREFACE

Your committee was instructed to investigate the situation at Westminster Theological Seminary regarding the subject of "Infant Communion." Your committee judged that in investigating this matter, it was necessary to consider and make recommendations regarding the position itself, its relation to students for our Classic ministry, and its influence on the teaching at Westminster Seminary.

In carrying out its task your committee pursued various avenues of information, including a number of consultations. Prof. Norman Shepherd was engaged to speak on the subject at a ministerial conference held at Dordt College in the fall of 1976. Discussions were held, in person and via telephone, with the ministerial candidates who espouse this view or have shown interest in it. On Feb. 9, 1977 your committee held interviews on this subject with various men in teaching and administrative capacities at Westminster Seminary: Rev. Messrs. A. Kuschke, C. Davis, N. Shepherd, C.J. Miller, R. Gaffin, E. Clowney. Various members of the student body were also interviewed.

While study materials on this subject are sparse, the subject was studied in whatever literature could be found of historical, theological and exegetical value. This study included the articles of Christian L. Keidel and Roger Beckwith in the "Westminster Theological Journal", Spring 1975 and Winter 1976 issues respectively. We requested Rev. William Buursma to translate from the Dutch a synodical report from the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland on the subject of "Children at Communion." This report appears in the December 1976 issue of "Kerk Informatie." The reports and positions of the United Presbyterian Church USA were also studied regarding their position on this subject.

I. HISTORICAL

A. IN THE POST-APOSTOLIC CHURCH

Infant communion was practiced in the Christian Church from the third to the eighth centuries, and in some areas as late as the twelfth century. The basis for this practice, however, was not covenantal but sacramental or sacerdotal, and therefore these references are not germane to this present discussion. It might be noted at this point that the practice of communicating infants continues in the Eastern Church to this day.

In the twelfth century the practice was dropped due to the emergence of the doctrine of

"transubstantiation" within the church. At this time, not only the practice of communicating infants but also lay participation in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper was discontinued.

While the Reformers did restore the cup to the laity, they did not return to the position of infant communion since they rejected the "sacramental" view of the sacraments and required that a degree of discernment accompany participation in the Lord's Supper. To our knowledge, infant communion was never a practice in the Reformed churches.

In the present day, the UPCUSA has allowed the practice (1970) at the discretion of the local church. This matter is also under discussion in the Reformed Church in the Netherlands and has not yet been completely resolved.

In 1974 the Philadelphia Presbytery of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church refused licensure to one candidate who espoused the position of infant participation in communion. This candidate was received into the Presbyterian Church in America while holding this position.

B. AT WESTMINSTER SEMINARY

The subject of infant communion gained attention at Westminster Seminary in response to the objection on the part of students of Baptist persuasion to Covenantal Theology. They argued that if infants are baptized consistency requires that infants also are to receive the Lord's Supper. In development of the argument against the Baptist objection to infant baptism, some students adopted the position of infant communion, although it was not taught as such by the theology department of the seminary. One student submitted a paper to the "Westminster Theological Journal" on "Is the Lord's Supper for Children?" The editors thought it of sufficient value for discussion and it was published in, the Spring 1975 issue. The result was an increase of interest in the subject on the part of both faculty and students. One professor's teaching on the covenant has given rise to the acceptance of the position of infant communion on the part of a few students without the professor himself actually teaching or espousing this view.

II. STATEMENT OF THE POSITIONS ON INFANT AND CHILD COMMUNION

In our studies and investigations of this subject, it became apparent that there are two different teachings involved: that of "infant" communion and that of "young children's" communion. It is important that these two be distinguished since the former differs from the traditional Reformed view in principle while the latter bears more the marks of difference in degree.

A. INFANT COMMUNION POSITION

On the basis of the covenant, "I will be a God to you and to your seed," (Gen. 17:7ff.) those holding to the position of infant communion argue that it is required that all persons baptized in infancy are in union and communion with Christ and therefore are entitled to receive the signs and seals of the Lord's Supper by passive participation as soon as these infants are physically able to ingest the elements.

B. CHILD COMMUNION POSITION

In contrast to "infant" communion, those holding to "child" communion teach that the Lord's Supper should be withheld from children until they are able to respond to their Christian nurture with a simple statement of their relationship to Christ (e.g. "Jesus loves me," or, "I love Jesus"). However, a formal confession of faith before the Church is not required of covenant children before admittance to the Lord's Table according to those who hold this view.

III. RELEVANT DATA

A. SCRIPTURAL DATA USED TO SUPPORT INFANT COMMUNION

On the analogy that infants are baptized because of the relationship between circumcision and baptism, supporters of infant communion argue that infants (or young children) are to receive the Lord's Supper because of the relationship said to exist between the Passover and the Lord's Supper. In view of the Scriptural evidence for the former position (Gen. 17:10-14), is there also Scriptural evidence for the latter?

The following evidence is presented

It is argued that on the basis of Exodus 12:3,4 the Passover was eaten by every member of the household, including infants. The same Hebrew expression "according to the number of persons" (lit. "each one according to the mouth of his. eating," Ex. 12:4) is also found in Exodus 16:16,18,21 in the context of eating the manna.. Since there was no other food but. manna to eat, this expression would indicate that the children as well as adults partook of the manna. Relating this to Exodus 12, it would appear to indicate that all who were physically capable of eating partook of the Passover meal.

It is argued on the basis of Ex. 12:26 where children asked, "What mean ye by this service?" that this indicates that these children ate of the Passover Lamb.

In addition, the Scripture shows in Deut. 16:11,14 that children were included as participants in other Old Testament feasts (although specific ages are not mentioned). It is therefore assumed that they also participated in the Passover.

Another argument is based on the command in Ex. 12:47 that "all the congregation of Israel shall keep it" (i.e. the Passover). In Joel 2:16 the word "congregation" is broken down to include "children and nursing infants." On that basis children and nursing infants are to be included in the congregation that is to partake of the Passover meal.

It is further argued that explicit statements regarding participation of infants and children in the Passover are absent because of the common practice of children participating in all the communal meals.

to the New Testament we read that "Christ is our Passover" (I Cor. 5:7) and that the Lord's Supper is a communal meal (I Cor. 10:16,17) which combines and culminates all the Old Testament feasts including especially the Passover. Since children partook of all the Old Testament feasts, it is likewise assumed that children did and are now to partake of the Lord's Supper.

To answer the objection that faith and discernment are required for participation in the Lord's Supper on the basis of I Cor. 11:27-31, supporters of infant or child communion reply that it is not a lack of intellectual understanding with regard to the Lord's Supper that is here in view but the matter of sinful moral behavior (gluttony, drunkenness, and a failure to share and to eat communally). Therefore they argue that this passage does not disbar infants or young children from the Lord's Table because of lack of intellectual comprehension as to the meaning and significance of the Lord's Supper because this passage does not speak to the issue of infant or child participation in the Lord's Supper.

B. SCRIPTURAL DATA AGAINST THE SUPPORT OF INFANT OR YOUNG CHILDREN'S COMMUNION

Examination of the passages appealed to in the Old Testament does not substantiate the claim that infants or young children partook of the Passover. In no instance does it specifically state that young children partook of the Passover lamb, even though it might be agreed upon that they did partake in the other feasts of the Old Testament. Exodus 12:3,4 does not supply conclusive criteria as to who are to eat, but rather provides the procedure to guarantee that the entire lamb would be eaten.

In Exodus 12:26 there is no evidence that the child himself was a partaker of the Passover lamb. The question, "What mean ye by this service?" would seem to indicate that the child was not one of the partakers. In any case, he did not know what the service was intended for, and the father is commanded to instruct the child so that he might discern its meaning. Even if he were present at the service (as children are today), it is inconclusive that the child took part in the eating of the Passover lamb.

Although we may agree that children partook of the various other feasts, the Scripture does not set forth any commands for children to eat of the Passover lamb, and there is no warrant for assuming that they did participate. The argument that says that the silence with regard to the participation of infants and children in the Passover meal is due to the fact that child participation was so common in the other feasts that it need not be mentioned is an argument that stands on very weak grounds. The absence of a specific command does not mean that the children were included, but more likely that they were excluded. It would appear more likely that the Passover, the first and most important feast, would have more detailed information than the subsequent and less important feasts. To base an argument from these lesser feasts to the Passover is a doubtful methodology.

The above arguments demonstrate that it cannot be proven that infants or young children participated in the Passover. It is assumed by protagonists for infant communion that silence means that they did partake, but it should be noted that it can likewise mean that they did not partake. On the analogy between circumcision and baptism, it is perfectly clear that here we are dealing with infants in circumcision and therefore also in baptism, as the covenant unfolds. But in the case of the Passover and Lord's Supper analogy, there is no specific command requiring that infants or young children should eat the Passover and hence also the Lord's Supper. The desired parallel is lacking. It is the Reformed principle of worship that we practice only what is specifically commanded in the Scripture. This does not allow practices to be adopted on the basis of the Scripture's silence on a subject.

In the New Testament the Lord's Supper was instituted at the Passover meal as a commemoration of the Lord's death., and therefore as a fulfillment of the Old Testament sacrificial system. Both the

Passover and the Lord's Supper require a remembrance of the redemptive work of God (the Passover commemorating the type of which Christ is the fulfillment, and the Lord's Supper commemorating the completed atoning work of Christ). Such remembrance requires a prior knowledge and comprehension of these redemptive acts.

In the institution of the Lord's Supper itself, a conscious participation in the Lord's body - "Take, eat; this is my body" (Matt. 26 :26 ; Mk. 14 :22 ; Lk. 22 :19) - and a conscious faith "This do in remembrance of me" (Lk. 22 :19 ; I Cor. 11:24,25) clearly indicate that a proper discernment of the Lord's body is a prerequisite of a proper eating and drinking of the Lord's Supper. Paul admonishes the Corinthians for a failure to do this by their sinful actions (I Cor. 11:18-34) . Such sinful action presupposes a lack of rightly comprehending the Lord's body, the person and work of Christ. The Corinthians' sinful action resulted from a sinful judgment of the meaning and significance of the Lord's Supper. Implicit in the true participation in the Lord's Supper is a true judgment concerning its meaning. Either sinful disobedience or ignorance prevent the proper partaking of the Lord's Supper because they cannot or will not rightly discern the Lord's body. Repentance, faith and obedience are therefore required for participation in the Lord's Supper. Infants and young children are incapable of meeting these requirements. Since the Lord's Supper is communion with Christ, can one either sinfully or ignorantly commune with Christ? Baptism is a sign and seal of entrance into union and communion with Christ. The Lord's Supper is the sign and seal of continued communion and growth in Christ which to be meaningful requires a consciousness of that fellowship with Christ. Without faith it is impossible to remember Christ's death until He comes, or to comprehend His spiritual presence or to enjoy fellowship with Him. To deny this, in the light of the fact that Jesus requires us to remember - "This do in remembrance of me" - would be to approach a position in which the benefit of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper operates `ex opere operato.'

A true feeding on Christ is to feed on Him by faith (John 6:50-58), "for without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him" (Heb. 11:6) .

While the proponents of infant and child communion say that I Cor. 11:27-29 does not apply to infants but to adults, we must disagree and say that the "whosoever" (v. 27) would include children as well as adults. Even if we follow the argument that children were regularly partaking of the Lord's Supper in New Testament times, then they were included among those at Corinth who were guilty along with their fathers of not discerning the Lord's body. Whether we grant that infants partook of the Lord's Supper or not, they are addressed in the command to "examine themselves," to be discerning, and to know what it means to eat and drink "worthily." I Cor. 11:27-29 has a universal application, such that it would be unreasonable to assume that, an infant or very young child would be able to meet the demands required for proper and meaningful participation.

C. CREEDS

To our knowledge, no evangelical creeds support the position of infant or child participation in the Lord's Supper. Question 81 of the "Heidelberg Catechism." requires repentance for sin, trust in the atoning work of Christ, ,and a desire to amend one's life as a condition or prerequisite to coming to the Lord's Table.

The "Westminster Confession of Faith" and the "Larger Catechism" (29 :1; 29 :7 ; Q.'s 170, 171, 172, 174, 175, and 177) state that faith, and the ability to examine one's faith and life are a

prerequisite for those who receive the Lord's Supper. Other Reformed Confessions such as the "Geneva Confession" of 1536 (Art. 16), the "Scottish Confession of Faith" of 1560 (Ch. 22), the "Belgic Confession" of 1561 (Art. 35), and the "Second Helvetic Confession" of 1566 are all in agreement with our standard of faith that the Lord's Supper should be administered to those who are of discernment and who have declared their faith in Christ.

D. WRITINGS

It has been objected that Q. 81 does not have infants and young children in mind when it states the qualifications of participants in the Lord's Supper. However, Ursinus, one of the authors of the catechism, in his "Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism" states

"They are to be admitted to the Lord's Supper by the church, (1) who are of a proper age to examine themselves, and to commemorate the Lord's death, according to the command: `This do in remembrance of me,' `let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread,' 'Ye do show the Lord's death till he come: (I Cor. 11:25,26,28). The infant children of the church are, therefore, not admitted to the use of the Lord's Supper, even though they are included among the numbers of the faithful." ("Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism," Eerdmans,. 1956, p. 429)

Again, Ursinus says

". . . those who have faith and repentance, not only in possibility, but actually, ought to come to, and partake of, the Lord's Supper. Infants are not capable of coming to the Lord's Supper, because they do not possess faith actually, but only potentially and by inclination." (Ibid., p. 425)

John Calvin states

We must have a ". . . deep-seated conviction of our own misery which will make us hunger and thirst after him. And, in fact, what mockery would it be to go in search of food when we have no appetite? Now to have a good appetite it is not enough that the stomach be empty; it must also be in good order and capable of receiving its food. Hence, it follows that our souls must be pressed with famine and have a desire and ardent longing to be fed, in order to find their proper nourishment in the Lord's Supper." ("Tracts and Treatises," Vol. II, Eerdmans, 1958, p. 176)

In Calvin's "Institutes" he speaks of the distinction between baptism and the Lord's Supper. He argues that while infants are to be baptized, they are not to be given the Lord's Supper:

"This distinction is very clearly shown in Scripture. For with respect to baptism, the Lord there sets no definite age. But he does not similarly 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 (I Cor. 11:28) ? A self-examination ought, therefore, to come first, and it is vain to expect this of infants . . . If only those who know how to distinguish rightly the holiness of Christ's body are able to participate worthily, why should we offer poison instead of life-giving food to our tender children?" ("Institutes of the Christian Religion," 4:16:30. See also Calvin's comments in the "Institutes," 4:17:42 and 4:18:19.)

"The Directory of Worship" of the Reformed Church in the U.S. states in its form of instruction prior to administering the Lord's Supper:

"It is my solemn duty to warn the uninstructed, the profane, the scandalous, and those who secretly and impenitently live in any sin, not to approach the holy table lest they partake unworthily, not discerning the Lord's body, and so eat and drink judgment to themselves." (Emphasis added. p. 33)

This directory likewise outlines the three-fold examination that each participant must undergo. Such examination certainly requires understanding in the areas of man's sinfulness and accursedness, the saving work of Christ, and how he should show his gratitude to God from henceforth.

In very recent times some rather detailed treatment of this subject has appeared: "The Westminster Theological Journal," Spring 1975 and Winter 1976 ; and the Committee Report of the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland.

Rousas J. Rushdoony states in his work entitled "The Institutes of Biblical Law," that there is evidence from the Old Testament that children partook of the Passover, and in the New Testament that children were partakers of the Lord's Supper (although he cites no, Biblical evidence). Mr. Rushdoony says, "Arguments against this inclusion of children are more rationalistic and Pelagian than Biblical." ("Institutes. of Biblical Law," Craig Press, 1973, p. 46)

John Murray, in his book entitled "Christian Baptism," answers the objection raised by Baptists who insist that covenant theology abandons its own, principle in basing infant baptism on circumcision but not carrying this through with regard to the Passover and the Lord's Supper. Murray states:

"The fallacy of this kind of argument, as far as, the Passover is concerned, resides in the assumption that little infants partook of the Passover. There is no evidence that this is the case. It would be unreasonable to think that they did; the diet was hardly suitable for infants." ("Christian Baptism," Pres. and Ref. Pub. Co., 1962, p. 77)

Murray does admit that "less would be at stake in admitting infants to the Lord's Supper than would be at stake in abandoning infant baptism." (Ibid.) Murray goes on to show, however, that there is not an inconsistency in the covenantal position and, therefore, it is unwarranted that we communicate infants in order to satisfy the Baptist arguments. (Ibid., pp. 77-79)

EVALUATION

A. OF THE POSITION OF INFANT OR YOUNG CHILD COMMUNION

Your committee finds no conclusive evidence favoring either infant or young child communion in either the Old or the New Testament. In the judgment of your committee, the weight of evidence indicates the need of repentance, faith, and obedience in order to properly partake of the Lord's Supper. The Scriptural evidence indicates that we should be no more inclined to give the Lord's Supper to infants and children who have not reached the point of understanding and discernment, even though they be in the covenant family, than we would be to give the Lord's Supper to a severely mentally incompetent person who is also baptized and thus within the covenant community. In view of the severity of the warning regarding unworthy participation or failure to

discern the Lord's body (i.e., being "guilty of the body and blood of the Lord" and eating and drinking "damnation" to themselves), admitting infants and young children to the Lord's Table on the basis of inconclusive evidence would appear to be an unwise and doubtful practice on the part of the church.

We note that where this practice did exist for many years in the post-apostolic church there is no evidence that this was done in order to carry out a consistent covenantal theology, but rather to follow a sacramental, 'ex opere operato' doctrine of the sacraments. Thus, the weight of the historical argument for infant communion must be discounted, as those who engaged in this practice were in fact practicing a doctrinal error.

Your committee notes that the confession of our church, the "Heidelberg Catechism.," does not allow for infant or young child communion, nor has this ever been a practice of the Reformed Church. This exclusion of infants from the Lord's Table by the Reformed Churches clearly fits the Biblical evidence.

The study of the sacraments in relation to Christian nurture is a worthwhile area for research and discussion. Such study and discussion would benefit the church in fulfilling its responsibilities. It could provide a greater realization of the blessings on our children as members of the covenant, as well as guarding against mistreating our children as though they were outside the covenant and did not truly belong to their faithful Saviour Jesus Christ.

B. THE INFLUENCE OF THIS POSITION AT WESTMINSTER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

In the judgment of your committee, the evidence shows that only a few students (three that we know of) at Westminster have been influenced toward this position. Many of the students were totally unaware of the position. While factors contributing to the emergence of this position have been present at the seminary, the great majority of the student body have not been influenced by them. One or two of the professors have done some study in this area and have some sympathies for the position, but they are not teaching it in the classroom, and none of the professors holds to an infant communion. Discussion has largely centered around making our children more aware at an early age that by their baptism they are members of the covenant of God. It appears that the students themselves have carried this emphasis on covenantal awareness in the direction of "infant" communion.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

A. REGARDING THE POSITION

1. Your committee recommends that Classis take note that the position of infant or young child communion as set forth in the above report is not in keeping with our standard, the "Heidelberg Catechism," based on the Biblical evidence as understood by your committee, the Reformed fathers, and the body of Reformed Churches.

2. Your committee recommends that Classis encourage the study of the theology of the Bible with a view to our growth in understanding our Reformed Faith and its application to our practice.

B. REGARDING WESTMINSTER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

3. Your committee recommends that a copy of this report be sent to Westminster Theological Seminary., to call it to their attention that the teaching which permits communicating infants or young children prior to discernment of the Lord's body is a position which is contrary to our understanding of the Scriptures and our confession, the "Heidelberg Catechism."

C. REGARDING FUTURE CANDIDATES TO THE MINISTRY IN THE REFORMED CHURCH IN THE U.S.

4. In view of the fact that licensure requires subscription to the "Heidelberg Catechism," and that the position of infant or young child communion is contrary to that confession, your committee recommends that those candidates holding the position of infant or young child communion not be received as licentiates in, our church.

5. Your committee recommends that candidates holding this position, or any other doctrine at variance with the "Heidelberg Catechism," be under the counsel and instruction of the Committee on Candidates and Credentials until such time as the matter is resolved.

Respectfully submitted,

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