

Children and Holy Communion

Mark 10:13-16

Pastor Tom Anderson

Children learn most powerfully by example. They learn most powerfully by acting the truth. They learn best about how to worship by example and by participation.

The Hebrew people knew this and children were included in the worship life of Israel from the beginning. They were not segregated off into a corner to watch cartoons while the adults worshipped. The Psalmist wrote, “Out of the mouths of babes and infants, you have ordained praise.” (Psalm 8:2)

When Abraham and his son Isaac were walking to Mt. Moriah, Isaac asked his father, “Behold the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for sacrifice?” (Genesis 22:7) His question reveals that he had accompanied his father many times before to offer sacrifices to the LORD. Young Samuel, soon after he was weaned was participating in the sacrifices under the supervision of Eli, the priest. At the Passover meal, the youngest children played a leading role in the celebration. In accordance with the scripture (Exodus 12:24-27) they were to ask the question that started the liturgy, “Why is this night different from all others?” Children were to appear before the Lord at each of the 3 great festivals of Israel: the Passover, the festival of weeks and the festival of booths. (Deuteronomy 16:11) Children were to be active participants with their families when they offered sacrifices at the holy place (Deuteronomy 12:12). If this was true under the old covenant, what about the place of children in the new worship under the new covenant? More to the point, can children participate in Holy Communion? What is the Biblical rationale for such a practice? How does it figure in the history of the church? What are the objections to it? What would be the advantages of it? And how should children participate if they are permitted?

Let’s begin the Biblical argument with Romans 12:4-5 “For as in one body we have many members, and all of the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.” In other words there is a unity within the diversity of age, race, gender, language, ability, class, or status of church members. This unity gets expressed in the powerful symbolism of eating from the same loaf and drinking from

the same cup of salvation. It could be said to betray the unity of Christ to separate or prohibit members from partaking of this central act of worship on the basis of age.

The New Testament is silent on the question of children taking communion. There simply is no explicit direction or guidance on the matter. For some this silence is enough to show that such a practice is unwarranted. But the New Testament is also silent about women or slaves partaking Holy Communion yet no one would question such practices as faithful to the Biblical message. Arguments based on silence are inconclusive and insufficient to guide us.

Are children members of the body of Christ? We believe God wants them to be and Jesus invites them to be. From the days of Abraham and Sarah it has always been the duty and the privilege for believing parents to bring their infants before the Lord to be adopted into the covenant of salvation and marked by the Genesis of that covenant. Abraham and Sarah were saved by grace through faith in the promises of God. And God extended his grace to include their infant child, Isaac. He commanded them to bring Isaac before the Lord to be circumcised and included within the covenant of salvation. So it is that Christian parents also are invited by God to bring their children to him to be marked by the water of baptism which is the Genesis of the New Covenant in Jesus Christ. Colossians 2:11-12 makes the truth plain: "In Christ you were circumcised with a circumcision not made with hands...you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead." It's baptism that makes our children part of the covenant and members of the body of Christ. Could the table of the Lord be properly denied to a member of the body of Christ?

It is to be admitted that such a practice has long been opposed in both Catholic and Protestant churches. Some among us might even be scandalized that we would even consider such a practice. But it was not always so. John Calvin was staunchly opposed to children taking communion but even Calvin admitted, "This permission was indeed commonly given in the ancient church."

St. Cyprian in 650 A.D. wrote profusely about the common practice in his day of communing children. Augustine also wrote eloquently on the subject, "Yes, they're infants, but they are his members. They're infants, but they receive his sacraments. They are infants, but they share in his table, in order to have life in themselves" From the first written references in the third century until the twelfth and thirteenth century there is overwhelming evidence that the Western Church regularly brought her infants and young children to participate in the Lord's Supper.

So what happened? Why did this practice just disappear? One word explains it all: transubstantiation—the Medieval Catholic belief that the bread and wine actually change into the flesh and blood of Christ. The appearance of this doctrine in the middle ages put a chill on the entire celebration of Holy Communion. People became afraid of the Lord’s Supper. They did not want to risk spilling the wine or dropping the bread and therefore profaning the body of Christ. Superstitions abounded and children were prohibited for fear they would profane the sacrament. By the act of a church council in 1215 AD the practice was officially extinguished in the Roman Church. Confirmation and confession were required before communion could be taken. The leaders of the protestant reformation never challenged this Roman practice. But it was not so in the Eastern Orthodox churches. They continued in unbroken tradition communing children even to this day. It’s safe to say that while church traditions are not unanimous, there are no Biblical or theological reasons why children should be banned from the table. Indeed, both the Bible and history witness in favor of the practice.

One objection many make is Paul’s word in 1 Corinthians 11:27 “Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord.” It might be argued that children lacking the power of reason simply aren’t capable of the mature faith necessary to take communion in a worthy manner. Yet a child’s faith is enough to connect them to Jesus. Children—as well as adults-- can be taught worthy manners. I’ve seen it! It is the responsibility of both the parents and the adults of the church to teach such manners to the children of the church.

How do we teach children reverence for Holy Communion? I believe it must start at home. I simply can’t expect behavior in church that I don’t also expect of my children at home. Parents have to begin with family prayer and worship time in their own home. Children will learn from the seriousness of their parent’s example. They will learn the boundaries of what is acceptable behavior during prayer and scripture reading at home. This can only happen over time with discipline and consistency. It won’t happen at all if we are forever separating them off from worshipping adults-- abandoning them to a box of toys or videos while the adults go off in a corner to prayer.

Children are not capable of abstract thought. They simply will not be able to understand our explanations of the symbolism of body and blood. They can only think in a literal manner and it’s natural that some children might even be frightened or repulsed by such talk. It is better to

explain the meal on their level. It is a meal Jesus gave us to remember his love for us on the cross. Cake and candles make a birthday special—kids understand that. Birthdays are special ways we have to remind each other how special we are and how thankful we are to have each other. So it is with the bread and the cup. It's the extra special way Jesus gave us to remember his love. As they grow older they will learn and understand more and more about Jesus' wonderful love. Just because kids can't comprehend calculus doesn't mean we shouldn't teach them how to add and subtract.

When children come forward for communion they should not be allowed to run, push or shove. They should not be allowed to be disruptive in any way. If they are misbehaving, parents will do well to take them back to their seats for that Sunday. Communion is a sacred privilege, it is not a right. Taking a child out of the communion line can be a tremendous aid in setting firm boundaries about behavior and a spiritual lesson in reverence for the Lord's Table.

Parents themselves need to judge for themselves when their children are ready for solid food and if they are ready to take communion in a reverent manner. I invite parents to speak with me if you need guidance in thinking this through. Children learn much by imitating and participating. Holy Communion can be a powerful means of learning about the love and worship of Jesus Christ.

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