

A Warm Invitation to Child Communion

Posted on Monday, June 10, 2024 by Douglas Wilson

Dear Darrel,

Thanks for your letter, and for the pointed questions about child communion. Please thank your session for me as well. It is rare to find the combination of attributes that I see in your questions—receiving biblical teaching with real eagerness, while at the same time cross-checking everything against Scripture to see what the truth actually is (Acts 17:11[📖]).



That being the case, I think I would like to approach this a bit differently, if I might. I do this because I know you have already read a pile of books on the subject, both pro and con, and perhaps this might provide a fresh angle.

I would like to take this opportunity to write to you about our practice of child communion, but I want to adjust your expectations before we begin. My goal in this is not “to prove” anything, or even to defend it against criticism. My intention is much more simple. It is simply to describe what it is like to think about the sacrament the way we do. And if I am successful, I will not have necessarily persuaded you of anything. I will not have converted you to the view that child communion is the way to go—although I would certainly hope for that.

Rather, Lord willing, I will have written of it in such a way that you understand why it matters so much to us. And perhaps I will even have written in such a way as to make even the strictest advocate of credo-communion turn away from this prospect with some regret, thinking “wouldn’t it be wonderful if this *were* true?”

We know that what we have is entirely the grace of God, and we also know that we didn’t earn a bit of it. What do you have that you did not receive as a gift? And if as a gift, why boast as though it were not a gift (1 Cor. 4:7)? That being said, it would be a form of sheer ingratitude not to acknowledge the reality of the gift.

So when we look around at the evangelical world, and consider the “retention rates” of our covenant offspring, the picture is more than alarming. According to one study, among young people who attended church for at least a year in high school, fully two-thirds of them dropped out of church for at least a year in college. Two thirds is a high casualty rate. Other studies point to a situation at least as grim. The apostasy rates with our evangelical young people are appalling . . . even though most of them were communicant members of their churches before they launched, having been made to wait until they made a “credible” profession of faith. But how credible is a profession of faith that cannot stand up to one unbelieving freshman intro course?

Before we engage in a debate about the comparative advantages of different methods of parachute packing, we need to begin with the recognition that we live in a time when many or most of the parachutes aren’t opening. *Something* is really wrong somewhere.

But I hasten to add that we do not believe that child communion is an answer in itself, or all by itself. If we were to seek to address the problem of young adult apostasy by simply bringing very young children to the Table, that would be just two notches above rank superstition. The sacrament is not a talisman, and not to be used as a mojo hand. Child communion, as we are practicing it, is part of an integrated network of doctrines grouped under the heading of what it means to bring up children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. This network of doctrines includes clear and pointed teaching about confession of sin, the necessity of full-orbed Christian education, honoring father and mother, children participating through the entire service, worldview thinking, and child communion. Child communion in *isolation* is a recipe for disaster—just like our current approach has been a disaster.

So when I compare the general loss of faith among young people with the retention of young people in our congregation, the results are also startling . . . but in the opposite direction. Overwhelmingly, our kids are growing up Christian, marrying Christian, and bringing up more Christians. And yes, we have had flame outs, but they have not been the norm. And, also by the grace of God, I have three kids and their spouses, eighteen grandkids, and three great grands, all of them Christian. Someone might object that I can’t know this about the youngest of these yet, but for various reasons I believe that I can. They are coming with us, and we are going to Heaven.

A covenant home is a spiritual place, but it is a spiritual place in *this* world. It is not as though I have a natural family that lives under my roof, and then another spiritual family that dwells someplace else. My natural family *is* my covenant household. And as a minister of the gospel, I have spiritual duty to maintain my qualifications to serve in the church through managing my household well ([1 Tim. 3:4-5](#)), and having faithful children who are not profligate ([Tit. 1:6](#)). All of this assumes that a minister's home is a spiritual place, ordered in line with the Word of God. My children are not added to this spiritual household when they turn five, or thirteen, or eighteen, or after they come to a certain level of understanding. They are born to it. We are their people from the get-go . . . and we are Christian. But this is not understood in any kind of "automatic" way because one of the things they are born into is a robust understanding of the absolute necessity of evangelical faith. That is one of the basic things they are taught. *That* is part of their legacy.

When we first bring a child home from the hospital, we do all sorts of things for them which they do not understand. Included in this would be our practice of speaking to them, and singing to them, *in English*. We do this despite the fact that they don't know a word of English. They don't speak the language at all, and yet we persist in speaking to them as though they do. Why would we do something so absurd? Well, because this is how someone becomes a native speaker. It is the same with following Christ. It is the same with being a native speaker of the "sacraments."

In this world, there are certain activities that you don't get to perform unless you have passed certain tests first. Brain surgery comes to mind, and flying airplanes for Delta. You first prove your proficiency and then you can "do the thing." But there are other activities where you are just thrown into the deep end, and you then become proficient as a result. When I first started studying English as an infant, I hadn't a clue about any of it. That's why I write English so good now. Joke. Little joke. Never mind.

So given these two different approaches, the question is whether the Bible teaches us whether bringing up a child in the nurture and admonition of the Lord is more like becoming a trained professional or more like becoming a native speaker. And it does tell us this, very clearly.

How does Paul speak of the way that Timothy had been brought up? There are two significant things that Paul plainly states in this regard.

"When I call to remembrance the unfeigned faith that is in thee, which dwelt first in thy grandmother Lois, and thy mother Eunice; and I am persuaded that in thee also."
[2 Timothy 1:5](#) (KJV)

"And that from a child [*brepbos*] thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus."
[2 Timothy 3:15](#) (KJV)

The first is that Timothy shared *the same faith* that was present in his mother and his grandmother. This was an unfeigned faith, one that had dwelt first in his grandmother, and then in his mother, and then in him. It was the *same* unfeigned faith that dwelt in three distinct hearts. And when had this process started for Timothy? He had known the Scriptures from infancy (*brephos*). Timothy had known the Scriptures before he could read them, before he could understand what was being read to him, and before he could pass a theology exam on the meaning of the sacraments. This early knowledge was not a stumbling block for him in coming to salvation—rather Paul says that these Scriptures were able to make him wise unto salvation. So it did not result in him growing up as a spiritual ignoramus, but rather as an articulate *native* speaker of an unfeigned faith. This is how it ought to be. This is what Christian parents should pray for. This is how we should function, and the sacraments are part of it.

I don't understand the logic of withholding food from little ones, and telling them that after they have grown big and strong they can then start getting some food. And then, when they languish and perish through malnutrition, we console ourselves by saying that “at least we didn't waste any food on them, as they were clearly not elect and going to die anyway.” It is the food that makes us strong. It is not the strength that earns us the food. This is a cart and horse thing. When the Lord reinstated Peter at the end of the gospel of John, one of the things he was instructed to do was to feed the *lambs* ([John 21:15](#))—and not just the sheep ([John 21:16-17](#)).

So it seems self-evident to me that all who *are* bread should *get* bread. As all the participants in this particular debate are paedobaptists, it seems clear to me that this point should be emphasized more strongly. To be baptized is to be baptized into the body of Christ, and the body of Christ is plainly identified as “one loaf.”

“For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread.” [1 Corinthians 10:17](#) (KJV)

The argument is that little children are not capable of examining themselves ([2 Cor. 13:5](#)), and therefore are not capable of seeing how they are part of that one loaf. And because they cannot see or understand that they are part of the one loaf, they should be excluded from the Supper. It is thought that it is not enough to be part of the loaf, you have to understand that you are part of the one loaf.

“For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body.” [1 Corinthians 11:29](#) (KJV)

But it is actually the elders who are keeping them back from the Table who don't understand that we are all one loaf. Why are these elders not kept back from the Table? Little children have an inarticulate understanding that they are part of the one loaf, which is why they reach for the tray. But what are we to make of the pastor who baptized this very same child into the loaf, explained in the homily how the child was now part of the loaf, and then later insisted that none of the loaf be given to that child? Should such a pastor be kept back from the Table? Plainly not, but why not?

This is a mistake, but we have to remember it is the kind of mistake that the first disciples made also. They thought the Master was too busy for kids, and the Lord's response was to be highly displeased.

“And they brought young children to him, that he should touch them: and his disciples rebuked those that brought them. But when Jesus saw it, he was much displeased, and said unto them, Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God. Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein. And he took them up in his arms, put his hands upon them, and blessed them.” [Mark 10:13–16](#) (KJV)

Someone might say that there are no sacraments in this passage, and this is quite true. No water, no bread, and no wine. But Jesus is in the passage, and children are there, and self-important adult guardians are in it also. In Luke's account of it, infants (*brepbos*) are there as well ([Luke 18:15](#)). And most important to our discussion, the reasoning beneath credo-communion is implicitly there, and it is reasoning that is explicitly rejected by Christ. Instead of saying what we might expect, which is that children need to grow up to a certain level of maturity in order to come, the Lord instead teaches that adults must attain to a childlike simplicity in order to come.

As the history of the church demonstrates, this is a hard saying. Who can accept it?

Cordially in Christ,
Douglas