

CHILDREN AND COMMUNION

As most know, Jesus instituted the communion during the Passover meal with his apostles. It is generally accepted that the way in which he did this was designed to teach that the breaking of bread and drinking of wine superseded the Passover ritual. As the Jews under the old law covenant ate the Passover lamb, after sprinkling its blood on the door posts as a memorial of their deliverance from Egypt, so Christian communities break bread and drink wine to remember the deliverance from sin and death through the shed blood of Jesus. The statement in 1 Cor. 5:7 that "Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us" indicates that the Passover lamb was a type or foreshadow of Christ.

Now, even though the law was very strict, giving the people little leeway for liberty, it nevertheless allowed the children of believing parents to partake of the Passover and share in the memorial ritual. This provision did not have to be made in the law. God could have just as easily forbidden the children to partake, but he didn't. He was happy for them to be part of it and commanded that they be included. It would have been against the divine will (a sin) to exclude them.

Viewing this arrangement from a purely legalistic point of view, it could seem ridiculous or even outrageous and sacrilegious to let children partake, especially if they didn't fully understand what it was all about. But God did not see it that way. His wisdom decreed that the celebration of His great deliverance was to be a family affair, whether the children were old enough to understand or not.

As they grew up they would eventually ask what the ritual meant and come to an understanding of it. God, in fact, makes this particular point to justify children being allowed to partake (Ex. 12:24-28).

In passing, it is interesting to remember that the apostles themselves did not understand the significance of the bread and wine when Jesus instituted it. They did not know or believe that he was going to die on the cross.

If the communion meal instituted by Christ has replaced the one instituted under the law, and the one observed under the strict code of the law permitted the children to partake, it would surely not be unreasonable to consider that the same could apply under the more liberal code of grace which is in Christ. Is it specifically stated anywhere in the New Testament that children are strictly forbidden by Christ to celebrate with their parents his victory over sin and death, or is it a human tradition that prevents them, due to an over-ritualization of the ritual?

Some who believe it is wrong for unbaptized children to have communion point out that even under the law, those who were uncircumcised were not allowed to partake of the Passover. There are several points to be observed in relation to this:

1. No females were circumcised, only males.
2. The circumcised males were in the age group from 8 days old and onward.
3. Passover preceded baptism (1 Cor. 10:1-2).

If it was vitally important to be baptized first before having the Passover, why didn't God arrange it that way? Why didn't He tell Israel to have the Passover on the other side of the Red Sea, after they had passed through?

It has been argued that if the unbaptized children are allowed to partake of the bread and wine, they will have no incentive to want to be baptized. This might be true if the only incentive for being baptized was to qualify for the partaking of communion. There are of course far greater incentives than being able to have a little piece of bread and a little sip of wine once a week. For example: living with Christ forever in his glorious kingdom! In our experience in over 31 years, allowing our unbaptized children to partake of communion with us, has not prevented them from being baptized. Children who are brought up to respect the Word of God will want to obey the commandment to be baptized at the appropriate time in their life.

Because only mature adults were present when Jesus instituted the communion ritual, it might be felt that this indicates children should not partake. But if that first communion meal is to be taken as a strict example of how all others must be kept, then no children should even be present in the same room, nor women. In fact, there are no Scriptures which specifically refer to women partaking of the communion supper.

The death of Jesus on the cross and his resurrection are very simple truths which even young children can understand. Admittedly they will not understand all the deep and profound theological implications and side issues concerning the cross of Christ, but many older Christians still do not understand them either.

In our view, refusal to allow our children to share with us in the celebration of the goodness of God in Christ's victory, seems to create some inconsistencies. For example: To allow (expect) children to participate with their parents in the remembrance of Father God, by joining with them in praise, worship and prayer, yet not allow them to participate in the remembrance of the son of God by partaking of the bread and wine, does seem to be inconsistent.

The fact that the children may be too young to understand all the theological issues about God and His purposes and what some of the words of prayer and praise in the hymn book really signify, does not seem to matter in this case; they are still permitted and expected to stand up and join in and go through the motions of it. This suggests that partaking of the Lord's supper is regarded as being more important or sacred than speaking to the Lord in prayer and offering Him praise and worship. If children are allowed to enter into real

communion with the Lord in prayer and praise, why not let them partake of the communion emblems? If they are expected to stand and sing hymns and stand for prayers which relate to the memorial of the body and blood of Christ, why not let them partake of the memorial itself?

In our view, remembering the Father (and son), and celebrating their goodness in praise and prayer is the most personal, intimate and direct form of fellowship that can be experienced - more personal than eating a piece of bread and drinking wine. We feel therefore that to treat as more sacred the eating of the bread and drinking the wine than speaking to God in prayer and offering Him our hearts in praise and thanksgiving, is symptomatic of an over-ritualization of the memorial supper. In some churches, the tendency to rely too heavily on a legalistic approach by elevating the ritual of communion above worship, can be attributed to the influence of the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation.

Even in human circles, it would be unusual to find a father who was happy to allow his children to come and stand before him to give him thanks and praise and communicate with him, but refused to let them sit at the table and eat and drink with him and his elder son, especially if it was a family celebration of a great accomplishment.

It is generally accepted that communion was conducted differently by the first century ecclesia from what it is now. They did not have a tiny portion of bread and a meagre sip of wine (see 1 Cor. 11:20-21). It was a fellowship meal as was the Jewish Passover at which Jesus originally instituted the ritual. According to some writers of church history, it was known as an "agape feast" i.e. love feast, at which the love of Christ was displayed in a practical way by the sharing of bread and wine, as they met to remember their risen Lord and celebrate his victory over sin and death. In his book: "The First Century Ecclesia," J.B. Norris says: "The breaking of bread was associated with the common evening meal;" i.e. it was involved with a social meal, in much the same way that Jesus and his apostles partook of it at the Passover meal.

Act. 2:46 says the early Christians celebrated the breaking of bread in their houses, no doubt in conjunction with their evening meal. Children belonging to the believers would, of course, be present. Were they excluded from the table? Or were they allowed to sit there and be part of the prayers and praise offered to the Father for the provisions on the table, and partake of them, listen to the conversations during the meal in relation to the Word of God, but told to have no part of the breaking of bread in remembrance of Jesus?

If Jesus is happy to have communion with children who are too young to be baptized, by receiving their prayers and praises, and answering their prayers, why would he not be happy to allow them to share in the communion supper which celebrates his victory on the

cross? If one wanted to be legalistic, it would not be difficult to use the same arguments which are used to make it seem wrong for children to have the bread and wine, to also make it seem wrong for them to have communion with the Lord in prayer and praise.

In some circles the Lord's supper is known as the "Eucharist." This word is derived from the Greek word "eucharisteo," which is translated "gave thanks" in Matt. 26:27 where it is recorded that Jesus gave thanks for the bread and wine before partaking. In this sense, what took place in the upper room that night was not the first "Eucharist." During his ministry Jesus regularly "broke bread" and "gave thanks." He did it with his disciples as well as with a group of 4,000 (Matt. 15:36) and 5,000 (significantly enough, at Passover time, Jn. 6:4-11).

The same words "broke bread" and "gave thanks" are used on these occasions as in the case of the upper room incident. It seems that Jesus had a particular way of doing this and that he did it in the upper room in the same manner as with the group of 4,000 and 5,000. His way of doing this became so well known, that after his resurrection, some disciples did not recognize him until they saw him take bread, give thanks for it, then break it. "He was known to them in the breaking of bread" (Lk. 24:30-35).

The fact that Jesus "broke bread" and "gave thanks" and ministered it to the 5,000 at Passover time could be more significant than what is sometimes thought. Although he did not say: "Take eat, this is my body," he did say afterwards that he was the true bread, which, if anyone eats, will live forever: "Verily, I say unto you, except you eat the flesh of the son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." It is not difficult to see an echo of these words in what Jesus said in the upper room: "Take, eat, this is my body ... drink ye all of it, for this is my blood."

Jesus' purpose in breaking bread with the 5,000 was basically the same as when he did it later in the upper room where he requested that it be done thereafter. It was designed to convey spiritual truths concerning himself as God's answer to eternal life.

It is not difficult to see the Eucharist for the 5,000 as a type or foreshadow of the Eucharist that was to come, which was to involve thousands of people, and always able to encompass more (signified by the 12 baskets of bread left over).

But the 5,000 were not just adults. Men, women and children were present, and all partook of the communion meal. In fact, it was a "lad" who provided the five barley loaves and two small fish which Jesus took and used to multiply in order that all could partake. Talk about "a little child shall lead them!"

It can be seen from this that Jesus had no problem letting children partake with him and the apostles in a communal meal which had a spiritual purpose behind it which centred in him, even though those

children (not to mention the adults, including the apostles) did not at the time understand the spiritual lesson.

On one occasion during his ministry, children called out to Jesus saying: “Hosanna to the son of David.” The religious leaders were very displeased and asked Jesus to rebuke them and stop them. He replied saying: “Have you never read: Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings thou hast brought forth perfect praise.”

On another occasion some mothers brought their children to Jesus, wanting him to lay his hands upon them, pray for them and bless them. The disciples were opposed to this and rebuked them. There is commonly something in the male psyche that is intolerant of children, resulting in feeling that it is wrong to expect Jesus to welcome them and for them to expect to get close to him and take up some of his time. Such men clearly have a wrong conception of the heart of Jesus. They make the mistake of superimposing their own hardness of heart and intolerance of children upon him. So Jesus had to rebuke them and tell them not to hinder the little children or stop them from being brought to him, “for of such is the kingdom of heaven.”

Could anyone think of a more personal and intimate communion with Jesus, than having him put his hands upon and around them and lifting them up in his arms to his head to have face to face contact with them? Such contact with his own physical presence, having his hands laid upon them to bless them, is surely a more personal and direct form of fellowship with him than eating a piece of bread and drinking wine which is only a representation of him.

It is hard to believe that if Jesus was happy to have such close, personal and intimate communion with children, that he would object to them being part of a communion meal designed to remember and honour him by celebrating his victory on the cross.

For this reason, we not only allow the children in our fellowship to praise and worship with us and join in the prayers, but also join with us in the celebration of Christ’s victory over sin and death.

But we would not make this a fellowship issue i.e. we would not refuse to fellowship anyone who refused to let their children partake of the bread and the wine. What parents allow or disallow of their children is their business and is between them and the Lord. We would not interfere, let alone judge or condemn.

Neither do we think that the Lord will condemn and reject us if it turns out that we got it wrong, and should not have let the children partake of the bread and wine. It is hard to conceive of this being an issue serious enough to warrant condemnation and exclusion from the kingdom.

In relation to the subject in hand, some might feel that 1 Cor.

11:27-29 disqualifies children from having communion. In this passage Paul says: "Let a man examine himself and so let him eat of that bread and drink of that cup. For he who eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body." On the basis of this statement, some may conclude that children who are too young to examine themselves and discern the true nature of Christ's body which was put to death on the cross, should not partake of the bread and wine, for to do so would be to eat and drink unworthily, resulting in damnation.

However, Paul's reference to eating and drinking unworthily does not relate to those who lacked discernment or understanding of Christ's nature. In this instance, the Lord's "body" refers to the church, and the eating and drinking unworthily relates to an unworthy manner in which some members of the church were treating others in the church in relation to the communion supper.

Most revised versions translate "unworthily" to mean "in an unworthy manner." Paul is referring to what he had discussed earlier in verses 17-22. The Corinthians were misusing and abusing the communion meal. Some came with plenty of bread and went on ahead with their own meal, while others who were poor came with nothing and got left out and went hungry. Some had no wine and others took too much and got drunk. Their failure to share with each other as equal members of the ecclesia was failure to discern that the church is the Lord's body.

Their handling of the bread and wine was completely contrary to how Jesus handled it when he instituted the communion, for, "When he had given thanks, he brake it, and said: Take, eat ..." (v23-25). Jesus shared his bread around and didn't eat it all himself and make others go without. He wasn't selfish. He was so unselfish that he gave his very body and blood as a sacrifice so that we might all live. The Corinthian's selfish attitude was a basic denial of all the cross of Christ stood for and made a mockery of their communion meal. They were doing it in an unworthy manner. Even many children would not manifest such a selfish spirit!

The real issue, therefore, in 1 Cor. 11 was failure to share - failure to give the bread and wine to others whom the Lord wanted to receive and participate. Such is the issue under discussion, namely: unwillingness to share bread and wine with children of the saints who are precious in the lord's sight. Does the Lord see this as unworthy conduct? Would he regard it as sinning against the body and blood of the Lord? It certainly would have been a sin to refuse to let the children partake of the original Passover memorial, because the Lord commanded it to be done.

In 1 Cor. 11:28 Paul says: “Let a man examine himself ...” because the men, as head of each house or family, were responsible for the provision and distribution of the bread and wine.

One final thought in relation to 1 Cor. 11: If prayer, praise and worship are as important as communion, surely the exhortation: “Let a man examine himself” would equally apply. Therefore, if children who are too young to examine themselves and exercise discernment cannot partake of the communion involving bread and wine, would it not be inconsistent to allow those children to participate in the communion involved in prayer, praise and worship? After all, Ps. 47:7 says: “Sing praises with understanding.” It is fatally easy to put oneself in the situation of straining out gnats and swallowing a camel!

It is true that there are no references in the new Testament to children partaking of the bread and wine, but neither are there any specific references in the New testament epistles to children participating in praise and worship in ecclesial meetings. If absence of reference to the former situation means children should not partake of communion, would it not be consistent to regard absence of mention to the latter situation to mean they should not participate in praise and worship?