

For the Children's Sake

An Alternative Angle on the Paedocommunion Debate

BY RICH LUSK

The debate over paedocommunion does not seem to have made much headway on either side in recent years. Certainly both sides have made a solid effort to argue for their position. But no resolution seems to be forthcoming in the near future. As a convinced paedocommunionist, I find the church's sluggishness to embrace what I consider to be knockout exegetical arguments more than a bit troubling. But I know many on the other side who are gravely concerned over the fact that the "threat" of paedocommunion won't seem to go away, despite eight centuries of Western church tradition (including virtually all the Reformers) opposing it. Perhaps it's time to try another approach.

To ease my way into the discussion, allow me to scurry down a rabbit trail for a moment. Hopefully, my decision to use one controversial issue as a springboard to discuss another controversial issue will not simply confuse things. I am a postmillennialist. I believe the exegetical arguments for postmillennialism to be superior to those for any other position. However, I remember one discussion I had with a committed amillennialist. He seemed impervious to my attempts to build a case from Scripture, as I'm sure I did to his. I would offer up a text and its interpretation and he'd offer his counter-interpretation and a counter-text. Back and forth we'd go.

Finally, I said something like this: "Friend, let's set aside the precise exegetical issues for a moment. Consider this: Even if you feel compelled to reject postmillennialism on exegetical grounds, certainly you'd admit that you should want it to be true. Certainly you see that postmillennialism paints a beautiful picture of God's character - a God who longs to save and is reluctant to condemn, a God who generous rather than miserly with his grace. Surely you see that postmillennialism tells a better story than your view, a story of the church suffering and serving her way to victory. Surely you see that my position gives the church a larger vision and a broader hope. Again, you might find the postmil gospel too good to be true, but at least you should want it to be true!" My friend still wasn't convinced, but for a split-second, I had broken through his paradigm. He saw the attractiveness, that is, the sheer beauty, of the postmil position. He saw that the character of a God who was covenantally committed to save far more people than he damned was indeed compelling, comforting, and challenging.

Now let me shift back to the discussion of paedocommunion. One of the most frequent arguments I hear against paedocommunion is this: We must not give the Supper to our children, lest they eat and drink horrible curses upon themselves. Those who reject paedocommunion attempt to claim the theological high ground: We must withhold the bread and wine from our children for their own good. It's dangerous for them to eat. Some have even compared the practice of paedocommunion to child abuse, as if it did irreparable harm to the child. This argument that our children must be protected from God's presence seems a bit odd to me, for many of the same reasons that amillennialism now seems odd to me. In fact, when I hear it offered by someone, I can't help but think to myself, "Do you and I really serve the same God?" Of course, I acknowledge those who reject paedocommunion to be

orthodox brothers and sisters in the Lord. They are worthy of our love and fellowship, they are joint servants and heirs with us in Christ, and they should always be dealt with very kindly.

But there is no question that, at the very least, paedocommunionists and anti-paedocommunionists have radically different views of God. At some deep level, our understandings of God's nature widely diverge. The anti-paedocommunionist applies something of a hermeneutic of suspicion to God. He assumes God is more likely to curse than to bless. He assumes God does not want to feed our children at his table until they are old enough to understand various doctrines and so forth. He assumes ultra harsh judgments will be poured out upon our unsuspecting children if we allow them to partake of the sacred meal that Christ instituted for his people. He assumes that God either is not fully a Father to baptized children (which makes non-sense of the baptismal formula; cf. Mt. 28:19), or he is the sort of Father that does not feed his children until they have grown up big and strong (which is clearly absurd; cf. Mt. 7:9-11).

Moreover, anti-paedocommunionists also have a different view of the Lord's Supper. Their view insists that adult-like, rational understanding of the meal is essential to receiving its benefits (though apparently not its curses). They must say it is not enough to "Do this!" as Jesus commanded; we must also "Understand this!" The Supper's character as "free food from God," like the manna from heaven, is compromised, it seems. In short, as one wisecrack put it, anti-paedocommunionists view the Supper as a "choking hazard" for our little ones.

Allow me to paint an alternative picture for you. Imagine your family in a church that practices paedocommunion.; Imagine your children growing up as "insiders" to the kingdom of God, never being able to remember a Lord's Day in which God sent them away from church hungry. Imagine their joy and delight at receiving this special feast each week. Imagine being able to use the table as tangible proof for your children that God is their Father, that he loves them and cares for them, from the earliest of ages. Imagine telling your children that the King of the universe gave his Son to die for them to forgive all their wickedness, and proves it to them by giving them the bread and the wine. Imagine being able to use the warnings connected with the Supper in such a way that your children are challenged to stay in fellowship with their siblings and others. Imagine your children being inculcated into a body that cared for them and included them before they could reciprocate in any beneficial way. Imagine your children being showered with love and gifts before they could tangibly respond in love and give in return. Obviously, in this alternative universe, your style of parenting would be quite different. In addition, your child's entire concept of himself, the church, and God, would be quite different.

Now take the children out of the picture. The bread and wine come by each week and the children long to partake but are told, "The body and blood are not for you, at least not yet. You're not old enough." The children know the bread and the wine are gifts from Jesus, but apparently Jesus doesn't want to give himself to them. The children are taught to pray "Our Father" at home, but then at church they find that this heavenly Father withholds his special food from them. They're not welcome at the family table. In this scenario, all along our children are learning to think of themselves as outsiders, as strangers to the kingdom of heaven. They are bereft of the most tangible sign Christ can offer to show them that he loves them. The warnings connected with the Supper don't mean anything to them since

they don't participate anyway. The Supper - and therefore all it represents and is associated with - is simply not for them.

Frankly, I find the first picture far more attractive. It tells a better story. More to the point, it gives our children a better story to tell. "I grew up eating and drinking at God's table. My heavenly Father has always provided for me in the past and I so I know he will continue to as I grow into the more difficult times of life. The Lord's Supper - like everything else in my life - is a gift of pure, unearned, undeserved grace. Jesus has been sharing himself with me for as long as I can remember and so I want to love and serve him in return all my days." The paedocommunion position trains the child to think of himself in a different kind of way. It gives him security, but also challenges him to reciprocate to God's initiating love. Moreover, the paedocommunion position paints a more attractive picture of God and of the church. God's love is demonstrated in a tangible, memorable kind of way. The Fatherhood of God, a doctrine we have terribly underplayed in Western Christendom, is highlighted. The church is manifested as a community that welcomes and cares for the weakest and most vulnerable.

And so in conversation with an anti-paedocommunionist, the paedocommunionist might say something like this: "Friend, let's set aside the exegetical issues for a moment. Ponder with me the character of God. What do our divergent positions reveal about God? My position shows a God who takes the gracious initiative to feed his children, even when they can do nothing to make themselves worthy of the meal. It reveals a God who is generous, not miserly, with his grace. It reveals a God who is abounding in love and covenant loyalty, who is slow to anger, who desires to bless rather than curse, a God who shows forth his Fatherhood in the most joyous of all ways - by spreading a feast for his children. You may decide, in the end, that paedocommunion is wrong, but if so, I hope it grieves you that God has not welcomed your children to his table. Certainly you should want paedocommunion to be true, even if you have to reject it in the end. It really comes down to this: Is the good news really this good? Is it really so good that it actually includes our children from their earliest days? Is paedocommunion too good to be true? Too good to believe?"

I think paedocommunion is so good it must be true. Any other practice undercuts God's revelation of himself as a gracious, kind God, abounding in mercy, and reluctant to judge. Why should we protect our children from this kind of God - a God who did not withhold his very own Son, but gave him up for his people and their children? Why should we think that this God wants us to hold our dearly loved children at an arm's length or more away from him? The God incarnated in the man Jesus welcomed children and said the kingdom of heaven belonged to them. Surely, then, the feast of the kingdom is theirs! Thus, I would suggest that excluding our children is bound to perpetuate a false view of God and of Jesus. The anti-paedocommunionist position does not do justice to the Fatherhood of God or the child-friendly nature of Jesus' kingdom. We seem to have forgotten how freely Jesus ate and drank with sinners, how he blessed children who were brought to him instead of cursing them.

In addition, only paedocommunion maintains the character of the Eucharist as pure gift. If the Supper is withheld from little ones, whatever our intentions, we have communicated that the Supper is not a freely given meal, but something that must be attained to. However much we may train our children to call God "Father," the action of regularly passing the communion plates past them will speak louder than our words.

None of this is to downplay the significance of exegesis. I am not intending this as a "propaganda" piece. Scripture, after all, is the final court of appeal in all matters of theological controversy. But sometimes, painting a picture and telling a story can help us see the Scriptural teaching in a better light. I am not projecting my desires onto the pages of scripture. As with postmillennialism, I was convinced of paedocommunion on exegetical grounds alone long before I thought of offering these more aesthetic kinds of arguments.

But I do think arguments for paedocommunion grounded in God's character and the sheer beauty of the practice should be taken seriously. The benefits of paedocommunion are simply incalculable. There is simply no good reason to think we are doing God or our children a service by withholding the bread and wine from the youngest members of the covenant community. Only if we start with a view of God as something other than a loving Father, something other than the One who is abounding in grace and mercy, does the anti-paedocommunionist position make sense. Paedocommunion better squares with the character of God as revealed in the life and ministry of Jesus and recorded in the Biblical text. It seems to me the argument made for the children's sake - we must withhold the Supper from them for their own protection, lest they receive the fiercest covenant curses - should be turned around. Withholding the Supper from them is not a neutral, "safe" action. By not allowing them to draw near, we are pushing them away. As a result they must either despair ("God must not really love me since he won't feed me!") or become self-righteous ("The Supper is something I have to earn!"). This is a very dangerous place to put our children. For their sake, let's bring them back into the feast.