

# Children and the Lord's Supper

## An un-apologetic apology in favor of children receiving communion



*"Let the little children come to me and do not turn them away for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven." Mark 10:14*

*"The Body of Christ given for you."... But not for you?*

I change television channels each time a program comes on showing small children with distended bellies, the first sign of malnutrition and a prelude to death by starvation. It isn't that I don't care, but that it's so painful to watch and it makes one feel helpless. And while it bothers me to see starving adults as well, it is the children that catch my eye first and grab my heart.

I am thankful that some of the money we give at Church goes to help feed the truly hungry, that we have our food program of New Leaven and that some of the missionaries we support are actively helping hungry people improve their lot in life. Anne and I have been privileged to help feed a child and her family through our giving to Compassion International.

But while alleviating famine is important, so is ministering to spiritual hunger. Physical deprivation is obvious, but spiritual starvation is not as easy to spot. It is not accidental that Jesus instituted the last supper as the sign of his presence with us. Jesus was always eating dinner with someone! And somehow he miraculously feeds us through the Lord's Supper.



In the Bible in Exodus chapter 12 verses 26 and 27 we read "When your children ask you "What do you mean by this observance?" you shall say, "It is the Passover of the Lord, for he passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt, when he struck down the Egyptians but spared our houses."

The celebration of God's deliverance was and is the most important Jewish family event. Adults and children gather to remember that God saved their ancestors by mighty acts many years ago. The whole family eats together and celebrates. The Christian Passover feast is also meant to be a family event. We are to teach our children that the Lord's Supper is a sign of the saving acts that Jesus accomplished in his sacrifice and resurrection.

So too, our children should be the first to eat the Lord's Supper with us. Jesus somehow brings his presence to us with the simple gifts of bread and wine. We would not think of withholding food from our children, and yet we often withhold spiritual food from them at communion.

I find that I am troubled each time a baptized child reaches out for communion and then is told by a parent they cannot receive. The message we teach is that only adults can eat at the Lord's Table. And yet if only adults ate at our own dinner tables then all of us would starve in our infancy.

There is little about children in the New Testament, but what little we have points to Jesus unconditional blessing of them with his presence and love. And he chastises the disciples who try to keep the children out of his presence.

Perhaps like me you were taught that children should not receive communion until they can understand. As I get older I realize that I understand the Lord's Supper less and less with my head and more and more I simply accept the mystery that somehow, through the simple signs of bread and wine, Jesus feeds and strengthens me. And I believe that he will feed and strengthen our children as well.



In 1st Corinthians 11, Paul describes what he knows about the Lord's Supper. It is the earliest Christian reference to communion. In this letter he urges people to examine themselves before communion. Obviously little children cannot do that initially, but they can be taught at an early age to tell God they are sorry for any bad thing they have done.

But it is the second condition that brings me up short. He says in verse 29 "For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself." St. Paul is not talking about not recognizing the true presence of Jesus in the bread and wine, as much as the true presence of Jesus in one another. I believe we are to recognize in our children the reality that they are full members of the Body.

If God's grace depended upon our intellect than none of us could ever receive it. In fact if intellectual understanding is critical to grace then we should also refrain from baptizing infants who most certainly do not understand what is happening.

Fortunately God's grace can sometimes simply be grasped with our hands and lips. So when we come to the Lord's Table let the children come and let us not hinder them...."for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven."

The separation of children from Communion is peculiar to Western Christians and many of us in the 20th and 21st centuries are wondering if our ancestors were right to change 700 years of Early Church customs. The Eastern Orthodox churches never stopped the Early Church practice of giving communion to children, unlike the West, which separated communion from baptism in the 7th and 8th centuries.

Some final words are in order here. First, baptism is an absolute pre-condition to receiving the Lord's Supper. I do not believe that adults or children should receive until baptism has occurred. Communion is a communal or community meal, and baptism is the sign of being in that community.

Secondly Instruction regarding communion is important. Children do need to be taught reverence, and eventually self-examination, and finally some theology about Holy Communion. Initiation ceremonies are also important. If children start receiving communion early, it is still important for children of 2nd through 4th grade level to have instruction followed by a ceremony similar to First Communion where their participation is formally recognized. And in the event that they have not been receiving communion, I do urge parents to not wait until confirmation, but the indeed have the children participate in communion classes by 2nd grade, make a first communion, and begin receiving the Lord's supper on a regular basis.

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