

Children at the Lord's Supper—What the Bible Says

There are things you miss when you read others' mail as a means of education. We see this when we try to discern whether the first-century Church allowed children to participate in the Eucharist. This is a topic which simply never comes up in the New Testament. Were there heated debates in letters which didn't survive? Was there disagreement, but not serious enough to warrant letters from an apostle? Or did everyone just agree on the issue? We do know the early church had children who *could* have taken communion: 1 and 2 Timothy address multigenerational churches in Ephesus, and Timothy himself was the son of a believing mother and grandmother.

What can we glean from Scripture on this topic? Let's consider first a common argument against allowing children to take communion. It relies upon 1 Cor 11:28, where Paul, trying to prevent division among the Corinthians, warns that, "A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup." Surely, then, communion should be restricted to those capable of careful self examination?

But in fact, Paul's goal in this prohibition was to prevent selfish behavior in certain members of the Body. Certainly this indicates that all those who are capable of causing division should examine themselves. But those who aren't in a position to cause this sort of problem aren't addressed here.

It is also pointed out that the Lord's Supper is for the New Covenant what Passover is for the Sinai Covenant. Indeed, there are several parallels between the Last Supper and the Passover: each inaugurated a covenant; in each the people of God were delivered from slavery; each involved blood of "the lamb"; and each is commemorated by a ceremony in which the elements are interpreted in a corporate ritual. So, given that children participate

in the Passover Seder, perhaps the early church must also have welcomed children to participate in communion?

This argument is not conclusive because, for all the parallels, communion was in other ways treated differently from a Seder. The liturgy was very different. Also, there are indications communion was celebrated weekly (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2) or even daily (Acts 2:46-47). And, of course, the new and old covenants themselves are very different. So while the Seder may illuminate the Eucharist and its symbolism, it apparently doesn't provide a strict pattern.

What, then, *can* we learn from Scripture? At a basic level, the Lord's Supper is for members of the Body of Christ (1 Cor 10:16), believers (cf. John 6:35 and 6:52-58) whose sins are forgiven (Mt 26:27-28). In fact, our own invitation to the Table in the Psalter Hymnal specifically limits participation to believers. Furthermore, 2nd-century writing shows that the early church made baptism a prerequisite.

We also see from Lk 22:19 that it's a memorial of Christ's sacrifice. For this to be a meaningful memorial, one could argue that the participants should be able to understand what's being remembered. (Though one could argue that *through* participation in communion children may come to better understand and appreciate Christ's sacrifice.)

In the absence of clear instruction, it is tempting to look for hints. For instance, communion prefigures the Messianic Banquet which awaits us at the end of the age (Mt 26:29). If the Lord came today would our children eat at *that* table? On the other hand, to take communion is to drink of the cup from which Jesus drank (Mt 20:22; 1 Cor 10:16)—is that cup of suffering something you wish on your children? Such speculation is interesting, but insufficient to answer the question at hand.

Our conclusions, then, are minimal: For a child to participate, he or she should be a believing member of the Body, and a strong argument can be made that the child should appreciate the significance of the sacrifice being remembered. And certainly any old enough to profane the Table with selfish attitudes or behaviors should be taught the importance of self examination. But should the child have made profession of faith? On this and other topics the Bible is largely quiet.

The best guidance, I believe, comes from 1 Cor, the same letter which is our most ancient record of the Lord's Supper:

"Everything is permissible" —but not everything is beneficial. "Everything is permissible" —but not everything is constructive. Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others.

(1 Cor 10:23-24)

~Tim Collins