

Faith Pulpit

The Reformed Tradition and the Problem of Infant Communion

INTRODUCTION

The title of this article may seem like I am suggesting that churches who hold to Reformed¹ theology should not be practicing infant communion. The fact is, they do not. One might wonder, “Does any denomination allow infants to partake of the Lord’s Supper?” The answer is yes. In Eastern Orthodox churches and a few other denominations, it is not only allowed, but it is a standard practice. Why do these churches accept this practice, and why is it a problem for churches who adhere to Reformed theology?

Churches who practice infant communion do so in large part because they recognize a tension. They consider that practicing infant baptism on church members’ children, but not granting those children all the rights of full church membership, is inconsistent. To churches who practice infant communion, membership includes partaking of the Lord’s Supper. You can search for pictures on the internet showing Orthodox priests spooning a mixture of bread and wine into the mouths of babies and toddlers.

In many churches who practice infant baptism, including those of the Reformed persuasion, pedobaptism also grants the baby membership into the church.² One writer discusses this tension when critiquing the liberal World Council of Churches’ landmark report in 1982, “Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry” (*BEM*). This document claimed broad consensus across many theological traditions and was the result of some 55 years of collaboration.³ In criticizing the tendency of the document to “exaggerate the importance” of the Lord’s Supper, David F. Wright cites the *BEM*’s contention that the communion celebration always manifests the whole church.⁴ Wright responds with, “At one level this is patently untrue for all those churches who do not admit to communion baptized infants who are acknowledged

to be members of Christ and his church.”⁵

The challenge Reformed churches face (as well as most churches who practice infant baptism) in prohibiting infant communion⁶ is consistency with their practice of infant baptism. I will explain this issue by examining the past precedent of infant communion, the challenge of balancing theological consistency with church practice, and the problem that infant baptism creates for churches who do prohibit infant communion, especially as applied to Reformed churches.

PAST PRECEDENT

Today, it seems all churches who highly regard historical precedent of church practice acknowledge the early church did practice infant communion. The evidence for this comes from several prominent church fathers, including Cyprian (c.200-258) bishop of Carthage. In one of his writings he describes a “baby girl” who, during a time of persecution, was separated from her parents and forced to participate in pagan rituals. After she had been restored to her mother and given communion, the baby resisted and vomited the elements. Cyprian interpreted this action as demonstrating the infant’s confession of having been defiled by the pagan practices. In his description of the episode, Cyprian seems to indicate infant communion was a common practice.⁷

Also in support of infant communion in the early church is no less authority than Augustine (354-430). Based on the John 6:53 text,⁸ Augustine boldly asserted that infants should also partake of the communion elements against the opinion of some: “But he who says [that infants should not partake] is inattentive; because, unless *all* are embraced in the statement, that without the body and the blood of the Son of man men cannot have life, it is to no purpose that even the elder age is solicitous of it.”⁹ In corresponding near the end of his life with a Vitalis from Carthage, Augustine wrote of the salvation of children. He indicated that infants would be judged according to what they had done “in the body,” even though they lived only a short time. He referenced those who had been taken to be baptized and who had eaten of Christ’s flesh and drank His blood.¹⁰ These actions would be counted in the infants’ favor as regards their salvation. Again, he seemed to describe infant communion as a normal practice.

However, there was a change of position later in the history of Christianity. During the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) acknowledged this change. In reaffirming the preeminence of the Lord’s Supper during the Council of Trent, the RCC stated the basis for not giving communion to little children. The Council still admitted the historical practice of infant communion, though justifying it as a circumstantial issue to that time.¹¹ Though there was a condemnation prescribed: “If any one saith, that the communion of the Eucharist is necessary for little children, before they have arrived at years of discretion; let him be anathema.”¹²

Thus, churches that give strong weight to historical precedence in church practice do not condemn infant communion, though most Western infant-baptizing churches do not practice it.

THE PROBLEM OF THEOLOGICAL CONSISTENCY

With this background,¹³ focus on Reformed churches' practice on the prohibition of infant communion takes center stage. The problem is really one of ecclesiology. Reformed churches desire an inclusive ecclesiology for the practice of infant baptism but practice an exclusive one for their refusal to permit infant communion. John Calvin was adamant in this regard: "Do we wish anything plainer than the apostle's teaching when he exhorts each man to prove and search himself, then to eat of this bread and drink of this cup [1 Cor. 11:28]? A self-examination ought, therefore, to come first, and it is vain to expect this of infants."¹⁴ After quoting 1 Corinthians 11:29,¹⁵ Calvin continues: "If only those who know how to distinguish rightly the holiness of Christ's body are able to participate worthily, why should we offer poison instead of life-giving food to our tender children?"¹⁶

The inconsistency is apparent in that the Reformed churches have church members who are not allowed communion. The simple fact is that the New Testament knows of no such division in membership. There is no "lower tier" membership in the Scriptures for those who have only been baptized, and a "higher tier" for those who have later gone to a catechism class or participated in a confirmation ceremony.¹⁷

While I agree that infants should not partake of the Lord's Supper, it is hard to see how Reformed churches can justify such a two-level church membership structure Biblically. The trouble comes with using both inclusive and exclusive practices in their ecclesiology.

Another issue becomes penetrating clear in reading Calvin. Many of the arguments he used to support the prohibition against infant communion, Baptists (and others) use against infant baptism. Calvin dealt with this issue head-on. He related baptism to an initiation, while communion was for "older persons, who having passed tender infancy, can now take solid food."¹⁸ Calvin appealed to the necessity of a person's needing to discern the Lord's body and blood, of examining one's own conscience, and proclaiming the Lord's death, all of which a baby cannot do. He included the Lord's command to "Do this in remembrance of me," of which infants are incapable.¹⁴ This whole section in Calvin's *Institutes* is well worth serious thought, especially when considering a Biblical understanding of what baptism means (see conclusion). The parallels to the justification of believer baptism are strikingly evident. While Calvin is not the only writer who shaped Reformed theology, his thinking has been influential in regard to Eucharistic theology and practice.

THE PROBLEM OF INFANT COMMUNION AND ITS SOLUTION

The difficulties infant baptism engenders can be solved by its elimination from church practice. Without infant baptism, churches would have no tension in their ecclesiology between the inclusive and exclusive practices of infant baptism and infant communion respectively. With the former abolished, the need for the latter would cease since only willing believers would become church

members, and the practice of infant communion would vanish. All Christians would have the opportunity to examine their own lives before partaking. There would be no need for an unbiblical two-level structure of church membership.

Of course, infant baptism provides much vital theological undergirding for Reformed churches. It is a key link for them between the Old and New Testaments based on the infant baptism/circumcision analogy from an erroneous understanding of Colossians 2:11-12.¹⁹ The truth remains there is no direct command for infant baptism and no clear example of infant baptism in the New Testament.²⁰ However, because of its importance to their theological system, Reformed churches would have a hard time letting go of this practice.

CONCLUSION

Back to the original question: Should churches have to choose between the tension of allowing infants to partake of communion and risk the condemnations in 1 Corinthians 11:29-30 in order to have a consistently inclusive church practice? Or should they opt for an inconsistent practice that would allow them to keep their cherished practice of infant baptism? The answer is neither.

Baptists traditionally advocate for both believer baptism and believer communion (with its requisite examination of a person's own life and walk with God), thus eliminating the tension described above. This allows Baptists a consistent practice in their ecclesiology: both are exclusive; the ordinances are for believers. Baptists should love, value, and cherish the gospel-centeredness of both ordinances:

1. **Baptism** is an identification of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ (Rom. 6.1-5). It proclaims the willing believer to be desirous of becoming His disciple (Matt. 28.19-20) and being identified as such with the purpose of living in newness of life. Baptism as a commitment matters to believers every day of their lives—not to get us to heaven, but to remind us to live as befitting Christ's disciples.
2. **Communion** centers on a believer remembering the purpose of Christ's death on the cross. His body was broken for us. His blood was shed for our sin. He died to take away the penalty for our sin that we deserved. The exhortation for us to examine ourselves in regard to Christ's sacrifice should spur us to holy living motivated by gratefulness to Him for what He has already done for us.

APPLICATIONS

1. Do you appreciate your church's practice of these events that celebrate the gospel? Can you defend, from the Bible, your church's view of these ordinances?
2. Are you now living the commitment you pictured and pledged at your baptism? Is holiness a priority for you?

3. Does your life display the respect for Christ's great sacrifice on your behalf? Does His death remind you to live for Him? Does your understanding of the Lord's Supper motivate you to proclaim to unbelievers the meaning of Christ's death until He returns (1 Cor. 11:26)?

Works Cited

1. In this article the term "Reformed" theology or churches means those who adhere to Covenant Theology.
2. Though without the right of infant communion.
3. It was the culmination of the ecumenical effort begun in 1927 at the first Faith and Order Conference in Lausanne, Switzerland. See David F. Wright, "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (the 'Lima Report'): An Evangelical Assessment," chapter 22 in *Baptism in Historical Perspective* (Great Britain: Paternoster, 2007), 308. This article can also be found in *Baptism, Eucharist & Ministry (the 'Lima Report'): An Evangelical Assessment*, Rutherford Forum Papers, 3 (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1984).
4. His words are: "Under 'The Eucharist as Communion of the Faithful' we are told that 'It is in the Eucharist that the community of God's people is fully manifested. Eucharistic celebrations always have to do with the whole Church, and the whole Church is involved in each local Eucharistic celebration' ('Eucharist', 19)," Wright, "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry," p. 317. For the full text of the BEM document, you can download it here: <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/i-unity-the-church-and-itsmission/baptism-eucharist-and-ministry-faith-and-order-paper-no-111-the-lima-text>, accessed 4 November 2018.
5. David F. Wright, "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry," 317. Wright cites another issue in concluding his thought (to which subject I will return): "At another level it seems unnecessary theological bombast, and in fact is more appropriately predicated of baptism, where it is not said in BEM," *ibid*.
6. How widespread this practice was might be challenging to establish, but it does have the testimony of several highly respected church fathers.
7. St. Cyprian, *St. Cyprian: The Lapsed and The Unity of the Catholic Church*, ed. Johannes Quasten and Joseph C. Plumpe, trans. Maurice Bévenot, 25th ed., *Ancient Christian Writers* (New York; Mahwah, NJ: The Newman Press, 1957), chapter 25 from "On the Lapsed," pages 32–33 in this edition; also alluded to in chapter 9 (p. 20). I found Bévenot's translation to be more readable than the one from the *Fathers of the Church* series: Saint Cyprian, "The Lapsed," in *Treatises*, ed. Roy J. Deferrari, trans. Roy J. Deferrari, vol. 36, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1958), chapter 9, page 64–65; and chapter 25, pages 78–79 in this edition.
8. John 6:53, "Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you." This was (and still is by many) considered a text on the Eucharist.
9. Augustine of Hippo, "A Treatise on the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins, and on the Baptism of Infants," in *Saint Augustin: Anti-Pelagian Writings*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Peter Holmes, vol. 5, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series* (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1887), chapters 26–27, page 25.
10. The letter begins with a discussion of the relation of prayer to free will and predestination, and transitions into this summary of salvation. See Augustine of Hippo, *Letters* (204–270), ed. Hermigild Dressler, trans. Wilfrid Parsons, vol. 32, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1956), 87.
11. The full statement is as follows: "Finally, this same holy Synod teaches, that little children, who have not attained to the use of reason, are not by any necessity obliged to the sacramental communion of the Eucharist: [Page 143] forasmuch as, having been regenerated by the laver of baptism, and being incorporated with Christ, they cannot, at that age, lose the grace which they have already acquired of being the sons of God. Not therefore, however, is antiquity to be condemned, if, in some places, it, at one time, observed that custom; for as those most holy Fathers had a probable cause for what they did in respect of their times, so, assuredly, is it to be believed without controversy, that they did this without any necessity thereof unto salvation," 21st Session, 16 July 1562, chapter IV: "That little Children are not bound to sacramental Communion." See <https://history.hanover.edu/texts/trent/ct21.html> for documentation. Accessed 4 November 2018.
12. *Ibid.*, Canon IV. Because of past precedent that allowed it, the Romans Catholic Church cannot now prohibit it, though they do not practice it today.
13. Calvin also acknowledged the ancient church practice in his 1543 edition of the *Institutes*, even before 1563 pronouncement by the Council of Trent (see above). Calvin wrote: "This permission was indeed commonly given in the ancient church, as is clear from Cyprian and Augustine, but the custom has deservedly fallen into disuse," John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vols. 1 & 2, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1, *The Library of Christian Classics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), page 1352 in this edition. Battles' translation is from the 1559 edition but note "c" in the text indicates it originated in 1543. This is from book IV, chapter 16, paragraph 30. Henceforth: 4.16.30.
14. Calvin, *Institutes*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 4.16.30, pages 1352–1353 in this edition.
15. "For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body."
16. Calvin, *Institutes*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 4.16.30, page 1353 in this edition. Henry Beveridge translates the last sentence as: "If they cannot partake worthily without being able duly to discern the sanctity of the Lord's body, why should we stretch out poison to our young children instead of vivifying food?" Calvin, *Institutes*, transl. Henry Beveridge (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 1997), 4.16.30. The 1541 French edition of the *Institutes* uses this phrasing: "If they cannot be worthy participants except with approval by testing, it is not reasonable for us to present to children their judgment and

condemnation by administering it to them,” Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*: 1541 French Edition, trans. Elsie Anne McKee (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 543–544.

17. Which then enables the person to take communion.
18. The whole quotation is as follows: “Furthermore, they object that there is no more reason to administer baptism to infants than the Lord’s Supper, which is not permitted to them. As if Scripture did not mark a wide difference in every respect!... For if we consider the peculiar character of baptism, surely it is an entrance and a sort of initiation into the church, through which we are numbered among God’s people: a sign of our spiritual regeneration, through which we are reborn as children of God. On the other hand, the Supper is given to older persons who, having passed tender infancy, can now take solid food,” Calvin, *Institutes*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 4.16.30, page 1352 in this edition.
19. See the Faith Pulpit article: “Colossians 2:11-12 and the Circumcision Infant Baptism Analogy,” <https://www.faith.edu/2018/02/colossians-21112-circumcision-infant-baptism-analogy/>.
20. In regard to household baptisms, several baptismal passages often used to show an example of infant baptism (Acts 10:1-48; Acts 16:15; Acts 16:31-34; Acts 18:8; 1 Cor. 1:16 with 1 Cor. 16:15). However, it is significant to remember that the issue with these texts is not whether infant baptism could have happened, but whether it did happen in these passages. The burden of proof remains on those who advocate infant baptism to show that it did happen, and advocates of infant baptism have never been able to do so convincingly. A helpful book might be Matthew Waymeyer, *A Biblical Critique of Infant Baptism* (The Woodlands, TX: Kress Christian Publications, 2008).

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