

**Studies in Exodus No. 13****Exodus 12:1-4, 14-16, 24-28, 37, 47-49****June 19, 2005****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

We considered the burden of this text last time: both the Passover history itself and the commemoration of that history in an annual feast. But there is an issue hidden here in this text that has recently surfaced in Reformed and Presbyterian churches and, insofar as we have not considered this question in some time and insofar as it bears quite profoundly on our practice here at Faith Presbyterian Church, and insofar as other PCA congregations do not approve of our practice, I thought I should not pass by this text without taking note of this issue. As you may know, Exodus 12 is one of the key texts in the current debate concerning the participation of covenant children in the Lord's Supper, the practice known as *paedocommunion* after its counterpart, *paedobaptism*. Circumcision was given to covenant infants and so baptism ought to be given to them today. Such is the position called *paedobaptism* – that is the baptism of children, *paedo* coming from the Greek word for child – and that is the conviction and practice of our church. We baptize the infant children of believers. *Paedobaptism*.

But for centuries now, indeed from the origin of the Reformed church during the Protestant Reformation, although *paedobaptism* was practiced and defended as a part of the Bible's teaching and the church's practice that has crucial implications for the spiritual welfare of the church's children, it has been our custom to withhold the Lord's Supper from covenant children. The thought has been that they should be old enough and intellectually mature enough meaningfully to participate in the sacrament. It is this practice that has led to our dividing the membership of the church – that is the baptized people in our congregations into two groups: the communicants – those who participate in the Lord's Supper – and the non-communicants – those who do not. In Reformed churches traditionally, including those in which I was born and raised, and, indeed, in this congregation earlier in his history, one did not “join the church,” which is to say, one did not become a communicant member and begin participating in the Lord's Supper until he or she was 14 years of age or so. It was never a rule that one had to be at least that old, but it was common practice and had been for centuries.

Several considerations have recently led a number of men in Reformed and Presbyterian churches to call that longstanding practice of withholding the Lord's Supper from covenant children into question. I was, some years ago, the chairman of the study committee appointed to consider the new arguments for paedocommunion being offered by Presbyterian Church in America men and I wrote the minority report for that study committee, the report defending paedocommunion. That was some 15 years ago now and at that time the church voted by a large majority to maintain its practice. Through the years since many more men have changed their minds on the question and, I suspect, the vote, if taken today, would be much closer than it was in the late 1980s. In any case, those arguing *for* paedocommunion, that covenant children should be brought to the Lord's Table as soon as they are weaned took note of these facts.

1. First, the early church practiced paedocommunion and, so far as the evidence goes, practiced it from the earliest times. Reformed and other paedobaptists have always argued that the evidence for paedobaptism in the early church is a strong argument that

paedobaptism was the teaching of the apostles and the practice of the apostolic church. But the early church also practiced paedocommunion. I confess that I didn't know that – that the early church practiced paedocommunion – until years into my ministry. When I discovered that this was true, it set me to thinking new thoughts. Surely the evidence that the church's children received the Lord's Supper in early Christianity serves as a powerful argument that paedocommunion was the teaching of the apostles and the practice of the apostolic church. Indeed, paedocommunion was the general practice of the church until the 12<sup>th</sup> century, when superstitious ideas about the sacrament – the wine actually becoming the blood of Christ and so on – began to work against the full participation of anybody but priests in the sacrament. The children lost the Supper when everyone else lost it; they just didn't get it back at the Reformation. Now, in the interests of fairness, I should tell you that some have tried to argue that the evidence for paedocommunion as a widespread practice in early Christianity is inconclusive, but it is important to point out that almost all opponents of the practice both during the Reformation era and in our own day have admitted that it *was* the practice of the early church. That, obviously, is something to consider.

2. Second, the argument *against* paedocommunion at the time of the Reformation was very superficial. In fact, if you go looking to see why the Reformers did not restore the Table to covenant children, you will be disappointed at how little effort was made to defend this decision. Almost no one was clamoring for children to participate in the Lord's Supper and the Reformers had any number of other pressing issues to deal with. It is not surprising, really, that you can't find more than a page here or there devoted to the question. To my knowledge, and I and others have looked hard for it, there is not a single book devoted to the question *pro* or *con* until our own day. In many great works of Christian theology, *even in many books on the Lord's Supper*, there is no mention of the question and no defense of the practice of excluding covenant children. It was a custom so completely accepted that hardly anyone ever gave it a thought. I don't remember the matter ever coming up in a seminary class or ever coming across an argument in favor of paedocommunion until I was well into my ministry. It was a custom carried over from the medieval church with little or no reflection and became a habit in the Reformed churches, so much a habit that it was not thought necessary to provide a justification for it.
3. Third, when an argument was provided, it was almost always solely a reference to 1 Cor. 11:28 and to Paul's requirement that people examine themselves before partaking of the Lord's Supper. In the mind of the church the argument reduced to this simple syllogism: people should examine themselves before coming to the Supper; little children cannot examine themselves; therefore little children should not take the Lord's Supper. If you find an argument against paedocommunion in a work of Reformed theology – you usually don't, but if you do – it will be this argument and almost never anything else. I confess that I knew that that was the argument for our practice and it satisfied me, until I thought about it for the first time. The only time we ever had to haul that argument out and deploy it, in any event, was when Baptists accused us of inconsistency. Baptists have always argued that if we baptized babies we should give them the Supper too and we replied – very weakly I now think – that the reason we didn't do this was that there was this additional requirement that Paul laid down for participation in the Lord's Supper.

4. The problem with the appeal to 1 Cor. 11:28 is three-fold and, in my judgment, each of these three objections by itself is enough to render Paul's statement about self-examination irrelevant to the question of paedocommunion.
  - a. First, Paul isn't talking about paedocommunion in 1 Cor. 11; he isn't even discussing the general requirements for participation in the Lord's Supper. He is addressing a sinful corruption of the Lord's Supper practice of the church in Corinth. What he says there has to do with that issue. He would have had to say more than he said before we could take him to mean that covenant children were excluded from the Lord's Supper by what he said. When he says to the Thessalonians that "he who does not work should not eat," without a conscious thought we know he isn't telling us to starve our children. He's not talking about children there. And when Peter says to the congregation on Pentecost that they should repent and be baptized, the Reformed (and virtually all of Christendom) have known that he did not mean to exclude covenant children from baptism. When 1 Cor. 11 is your primary, if not your sole argument in favor of withholding the sacrament from covenant children, you don't have much of an argument.
  - b. Second, Paul doesn't say anything in 1 Cor. 11 that the prophets of the OT didn't say before him. He said that hypocritical participation in the worship of the church offended God and that the Corinthian Christians should repent and obey. They should not think the Lord's Supper any good to them if they are not willing to live a holy life. But Isaiah and Jeremiah and Amos said *that* and said it as emphatically as Paul ever did. But, as we shall see, we happen to know that in the ancient epoch children did participate in the covenant, the sacramental meals. So when Isaiah said that his contemporaries should examine themselves and then should eat, he had no intention of excluding the children as a class. Why should we think that Paul intended to if Isaiah didn't and Jeremiah didn't and Amos didn't when they said the same things Paul says in 1 Cor. 11?
  - c. And, third, even if, for argument's sake, we were to take Paul as meaning that little children should examine themselves, well, then, let them do it. The assumption seems to be that little children are incapable of spiritual acts and are therefore excluded, in the nature of the case, by Paul's requirement that there be active mental and spiritual engagement with the meaning of the Supper on the part of those who participate. This point is often made as an argument against paedocommunion by Reformed authorities. But mental and spiritual life, as we all know, is a continuum and has very early beginnings as the Bible artlessly acknowledges when it speaks of a person "rejoicing" in his mother's womb, or trusting in the Lord at his mother's breasts, or knowing the Scripture from his infancy. A weaned covenant child should already be *beginning* to reckon with the meaning of Christ and his salvation and the implications of faith. Both the understanding and the practice of faith are continuums and their beginnings are, we are everywhere taught in Holy Scripture, ordinarily found very early in the life of covenant children. As the Word is given to a covenant child and its truth established in his heart, the sacrament naturally comes alongside to contribute its share to the establishment and maturing of faith. We teach our little children, our very little children to say "Our Father..." We teach them how to pray. We teach

them that Jesus is their savior. We teach them to confess their sins to Him. We teach them that the promises of the gospel belong to them. We teach them that Jesus is their Savior. Why then, for what reason, on the basis of what biblical teaching or principle, then, would we require them to wait years to eat their Savior's meal? After all, the one thing one must do for little children is to feed them! Withholding the Supper from baptized, weaned covenant children is a practice requiring an explanation clearer and more directly related to the actual statements of the Bible than has ever been provided. Fact is, as very little children can take and eat so very little children can believe and can begin to grow in the faith of Christ their savior. *Therefore, even if one were to accept that the text of 1 Cor. 11 requires self-examination by every participant, it would still not exclude weaned covenant children from the Lord's Supper.* Quite the contrary. It would seem to require their faithful participation, suitable to their age and spiritual maturity, as it requires the faithful participation of all members of the church. This is a point worth emphasizing. The typical statements in Reformed materials to the effect that the food of the Supper is not suitable for very little children or that the ritual of the Supper is beyond the means of infants often betray a failure to distinguish between a nursing infant and a weaned child or between the beginnings of spiritual life and the maturity of adult faith. It is an Achilles' heel of Reformed polemics against paedocommunion that Calvin (*Institutes*, IV, xvi, 30) should argue that "...the Supper is given to older persons who, having passed *tender infancy* [qui superata teneriore infantia...] can now take solid food." Well, how long does one have to live before one passes *tender infancy*? Another Reformed theologian, Bernhardus DeMoor says that we should exclude from the Supper covenant children who have been *recently baptized* [*Commentarius*, Pars V, 643]. How recently? Even John Murray says no more than that "We can readily detect that there is in the elements used and the actions involved something that is not congruous with *early infancy*" [*Christian Baptism* (Philadelphia, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1972) 77-79]. Statements like these amount to admissions that very little children, that weaned children indeed, can partake of the Lord's Supper, which is, after all, all that is being argued for! As arguments they may tell against the Orthodox practice of intinction by which the bread soaked in wine is given to the newborn upon his baptism, but they do not tell against the custom of children participating in the sacramental meal as soon as they were able to eat, the pattern established in Holy Scripture itself.

5. But if 1 Cor. 11:28 – the only real argument against paedocommunion one finds in our theological literature – is not a valid objection to the practice and so not a valid reason for withholding the Lord's Supper from covenant children, what is the argument *for* the practice. And here we arrive at Exodus 12.

What we want to know is this: what is the biblical practice regarding the participation of the covenant community in the sacred meals of that community? What does the Bible say about who should participate and who should not? And here in Exodus 12, and especially in v. 4, we seem to find the rule clearly laid down. You are to prepare the amount of food based on how

much each person in the household will eat. Then, again, in vv. 24-27 the impression is again that the family is eating the meal together, parents and children. There is certainly no suggestion that the little children are provided some other food than that being eaten by the adults. And, then, later in the regulations for participation in the Passover meal, in vv. 47-48 it is stipulated that the entire community of Israel is to participate and that no uncircumcised male may partake. But, of course, Israel's little boys were circumcised on the 8<sup>th</sup> day of their lives. Now nursing infants wouldn't eat solid food, but weaned children would. Prepare the amount of food necessary to feed the number who will eat. That is the rule.

It has sometimes been claimed that “the Passover, the place of which has been taken by the [Lord's] Supper, did not admit all guests indiscriminately, but was...eaten only by those who were old enough to be able to inquire into its meaning [Ex. 12:26].” [John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV, xvi, 30, trans. F.L. Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1965).] But even many who do not accept paedocommunion agree that this is an unnatural and tendentious reading of the text. V. 26 doesn't say that only those who can ask questions may eat the Passover meal. It just says that when they ask you are to answer them in this way. It is admitted, in fact, by many Reformed authorities that little children did eat the Passover meal. [So, for example, Herman Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, vol. 2, trans. W. Crookshank (London, T. Tegg and Son, 1837) 269 and Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1941), 656.]

The lovely rhetorical touch in 12:26 – “And when your children ask you...” – manifestly does not mean either that the children have been sitting at the table watching adults eat food that they are not permitted to eat or that everyone has to ask some question in order to be able to eat the Passover meal. Verse 4 assumes their participation in the meal; verse 26 assumes that the meal will become an occasion for conversation about the mighty acts of God. [Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, trans. I. Abrahams (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, 1967) 144] Regarding the directions of 12:3-4, one commentator comments, “The whole community of Israel is involved (v. 3) and the concern to include all Israel continues throughout the chapter as an essential feature.... The final phrase in v.4b offers the normal eating capacity as the criterion by which the computation of participants is made. The very young and the very old would not count in the same way as the average adult.” [Brevard Childs, *The Book of Exodus* (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1974) 197-198] That is, the little child and the old person wouldn't eat as much as the adult male. You take that fact into account in determining how much food you need to prepare. Remember, as we read in v. 10 all the food is to be consumed, none is to be left over. That's why it was necessary to calculate how much food needed to be prepared.

The phrase, “the whole community of Israel” in 12:3, 6, 19, and 47 is instructive. It is a way of speaking that emphatically includes the entire population of Israel. Consider, for example, the use of the same phrase in 16:1: “The whole community of Israel set out from Elim and came to the Desert of Sin....” That is obviously not a way of speaking intended to carve up the population into participating and non-participating elements, as if the adults set out from Elim but the children were left behind. When in 12:47 we are told that the whole community is to celebrate the Passover, it would be passing strange to suppose that the real intention of that direction was to include some of the community while excluding a substantial segment of it. It is

difficult to resist the impression that the interpretation of Exod. 12:26 that takes it as a demonstration of the *non-participation* of covenant children in the Passover meal owes its existence to the *assumption* that children would not have and should not have eaten the Passover, an assumption that, in turn, owes its existence to the longstanding practice of Christian churches not to give covenant children the Lord's Supper.

That little children ate the Passover meal is confirmed by the fact that they regularly participated in other sacramental meals in the worship of ancient Israel. *In fact, so far as the Bible ever directly addresses the question whether covenant children should participate in the covenant meals, the answer always given, the only answer ever given is that they should participate.* That is, the only answer the Bible ever gives to the question we are asking tonight – whether the little children of the church should eat the meal of the covenant – is “Yes!” As I said, explicit mention is made of the participation of covenant children in other sacramental meals. The children of the priests, indeed everyone in their households, shared in the sacrifices the priests offered (Lev. 10:14; 18:11) and the children of Israelite worshipers were included as a matter of course in the various sacramental meals of Israelite worship.

“...there bring your burnt offerings and sacrifices, your tithes and special gifts, what you have vowed to give and your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks. There, in the presence of the Lord your God, you and your families shall eat and shall rejoice in everything you have put your hand to, because the Lord your God has blessed you.” [Deut. 12:6-7]

Twice more in that section of general instruction for sacrificial worship a point is made of saying that the worshipper's “sons and daughters” are to participate with him in the eating of these sacrificial meals. [Deut. 12:12, 18] In a manner typical of the presentation of the liturgical regulations of the Mosaic law, the profile of participants is not always described, but, when it is, the children are included as a matter of course (Deut. 16:11, 14).

Second, statements such as these, artless as they are, are the more weighty for the total absence of contrary testimony. At no point do we hear that children *per se* are excluded from a certain sacrificial meal. At no point are we taught that certain qualifications must be met for participation in the sacramental meals of the covenant, qualifications that children could not meet by reason of their age or immaturity. At no point do we encounter what we surely might reasonably expect to encounter, viz. instruction concerning or the narrative of a covenant child being prepared for or granted entrance into this sacramental participation, having reached a certain age or having crossed some spiritual boundary. It is a point to be made repeatedly: the Scripture often *says* that covenant children participated in the sacramental meals of Israelite worship; it never *says* that they did not or were not to. Scripture knows how to say that certain privileges are reserved for those who reach a certain age, as, for example, it does in the case of the priesthood, but it never says anything like this regarding the participation of children in the sacramental meals of the covenant. Indeed, it says nothing remotely like this.

Third, there is nothing surprising in any of this. It is altogether what we would expect given the doctrine of covenant children in the ancient Scriptures. The participation of children in the sacramental meals is entirely consistent with the inclusion of those children in the membership of

the covenant community, in the Lord's insistence upon their circumcision, in the Scripture's inclusion of them as participants in the life of the community in ceremonies of covenant renewal (e.g. Deut. 29:11; Joel 2:16), in its artless assumption of early, even infant, faith (Ps. 22:9-10; 71:5-6; 1 Kings 18:12), in its everywhere treating them as spiritually susceptible to the nurture and admonition of the Lord, and in its placing them on a continuum of development in faith and devotion from infancy to adulthood. In short, there is nothing in all this teaching to suggest that some spiritual frontier had to be crossed before the children of the covenant were allowed to participate in its liturgical life, nothing to suggest that the sacramental meals, alone of all the means of grace, were to be withheld from them, nothing to suggest by what principle and for what reason they alone would be excluded from this part of the life of that community to which they are everywhere said to belong. On the contrary, all the teaching of these Scriptures consistently presents covenant children as members of the covenant community and so participants in its life and liturgy as they were able.

The data of the New Testament present a similar picture. Children are included, as a matter of course, in the membership of the church (Matt. 18:13-15; Eph. 1:1; 6:1-3; 1 Cor. 7:14), testimony is once again given to early, even infant faith (2 Tim. 3:15; Luke 1:15), the sign of the covenant is given to them (Acts 2:38-39; 16:15, 33), and, as before, there is not the whisper of a suggestion that the apostolic church practiced some adolescent rite of passage that was prerequisite to covenant children being permitted to participate in the Lord's Supper. There is no liturgical regulation to this effect, there is no narrative of such a thing happening, there is no teaching of such a principle as would render such a rite expedient or necessary.

The practice of the Reformed church in withholding the Lord's Supper from her baptized covenant children until such time as they profess faith was, as I have said, never furnished anything but a superficial justification. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* defines the visible church as "all those...that profess the true religion, together with their children" (XXV, ii). It defines the sacraments as "holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace...to represent Christ and his benefits, and to confirm our interest in him: as also to put visible difference between those that belong unto the church and the rest of the world" (XXVII, i). Of course, it is a principle of our theology that our children belong to the church! It maintains that "The sacraments of the Old Testament, in regard of the spiritual things thereby signified and exhibited, were, for substance, the same with those of the New" (XXVII, v). But children ate the Passover and other sacramental meals in the Old Testament. Upon those principles, manifestly biblical as they are, is based the Reformed practice of paedobaptism. By no application of those same principles can paedocommunion be invalidated. Quite the contrary. Paedocommunion is as much the necessary consequence of this doctrine of the church and sacraments as is paedobaptism. Perhaps this explains why our practice of withholding the Lord's Supper from covenant children is finally provided justification not in the *Confession of Faith* but in a few words of the Larger Catechism.

We can, therefore, put the theological challenge of paedocommunion in terms of this question: where does Scripture ever suggest and by what principle does Reformed theology assert that a participant in the benefits of the covenant of grace is to be denied the sign and seal of those benefits? It is not, after all, obvious why the Word and one sacrament (that is, baptism) should be given to covenant children at the headwaters of their lives, but the Lord's Supper, the meal of

the covenant, should wait some unnamed spiritual development characteristic of adolescence or young adulthood. One thing newborns need above all is nourishment.

That is the argument for paedocommunion. It can be elaborated in greater detail, to be sure, but the argument is elegantly simple and strikingly similar to the argument the Reformed are accustomed to offering for the practice of paedobaptism: 1) the covenant meals were enjoyed by covenant children in the ancient epoch; 2) the ancient Scriptures teach comprehensively and emphatically that the participation of children in the sacramental meals was by virtue of their membership in the covenant community and answered their need to participate in its life and ritual from the very headwaters of their lives; 3) the theology of covenant children and of God's way of grace with them taught comprehensively in the Old Testament is reiterated in the New Testament; there is no new doctrine of the children of the covenant in the last twenty-seven books of the Bible; 4) the argument against paedocommunion typically drawn from 1 Corinthians 11 and Paul's demand for self-examination on the part of those who had abused the Supper is an instance of the failure to interpret statements contextually; and 5) the evidence of patristic Christianity lays the burden of proof squarely on those who would assert that the practice of paedocommunion was not early Christianity's inheritance from apostolic Christianity.

Now defenders of the longstanding practice of Reformed churches to withhold the supper from little covenant children have fought back against these arguments. I have to say that, in my judgment, they have not successfully answered the challenge. But it is important for us to ask: what do they fear from the practice of paedocommunion? Of course there are many motivated by loyalty to the Reformed tradition. It is hard for them to believe that our revered spiritual fathers made a serious mistake in their interpretation of the Bible. But if they are pressed they will tell you that what they fear is nominalism, Christianity in name only. They fear that if we let our little children participate in the Lord's Supper from the very beginning, they will take their salvation for granted; they will assume that they are Christians without ever really closing with Christ. Paedocommunion, they reason, makes it too easy for the children of the church to suppose that they have become Christians automatically.

All of those are fair concerns. We must as parents and as a church take pains to ensure that our children claim the faith for themselves as they grow up and that they not simply accept the Christian faith as the wallpaper of their lives because it has always been there. But the Bible does not address the fear of nominalism by withholding the sacrament from covenant children. It addresses that fear, as here in 12:26, with the nurture of a Christian home, with teaching, discipline and the example of godly parents; with the instruction of the church and the godly example of the church family.

I read recently a review of a very fine book on infant baptism by the Southern Presbyterian Lewis Bevens Schenck. The book was published in 1940 but has been recently republished. It contains a very high view of the Bible's doctrine of covenanted grace to the children of believers and takes the modern Reformed church to task for having allowed that doctrine to wither away. It takes the view that the children of believers are to be viewed as Christians and disciples, whereas many Reformed people nowadays think that covenant children are to be evangelized like any other child. Schenck's view is that, being in the church, the little children of Christians should be treated as Christians until, God forbid, they prove that they aren't. The reviewer in

the *Banner of Truth* magazine took a quite negative view of the book. He believes in infant baptism but thinks of covenant children in the opposite way: that they ought to be viewed as unbelievers until they prove that they aren't.

That's the safer view, he argued. But it is time to call a spade a spade. That man represents a church that has virtually disappeared from the face of the earth. If it had done nothing but keep its children it would be a major force in Scottish Christianity today. But it has not kept its children! And a church is supposed to keep its children. In my view, the surest way not to keep them, to train them to be unbelievers, is to treat them as unbelievers. That is not the Bible's way. The church's children were to be treated as believers and taught to live as believers. That is the ethical implication of God's promise to be our God and the God of our children. But if we are to treat our children as Christians then how can we not bring them to the Lord's Table.

We do not practice paedocommunion here at Faith Presbyterian. We get as close to it as we can, the rules of our church being what they are, but a profession of faith is still required in the PCA for participation at the Lord's Table. So, we take professions of faith much sooner than used to be the norm; and, happily, many, many other PCA churches are doing the same. And that is alright. If it takes some years, as it will, to convince the church that the practice of many centuries is in error, so be it. Our little children, having come to the table at five years of age or so, will not remember a time when they did not come, of a Lord's Day, to eat the bread and drink the wine that Jesus Christ their Savior has provided for them by his body and blood. And in its own mysterious way, that Supper will, by the grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit, do its work in nourishing their faith in Jesus Christ.