

## How My Mind Has Changed, No. 2

### “Paedocommunion”

1 Corinthians 11:27-30

August 6, 2017

The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn

I began this short series of subject sermons last Lord’s Day evening explaining that I wanted to prepare us for the possibility that our new minister might not agree with me or with you in every particular. Through 40 years of a single ministry a congregation gets used to certain ideas and practices. It comes to think and act in a certain way. But some of those patterns of thought and action may change with a new ministry. Again, we are not talking about the central affirmations of the Reformed Faith or the character of divine worship; we are talking about smaller things, but nevertheless not unimportant things. Last time I talked about Presbyterian church government. The longer I have studied the question the more I have come to believe that it is difficult, if not impossible, to extract from Holy Scripture a single system of church government, at least to prove that this system or this other one is what is actually *commanded* in the Bible. I’m perfectly happy to continue a Presbyterian. Other church governments have strengths and weaknesses as ours does. Our church government – of course there are many different forms of Presbyterian government, some quite different from others – is at least as good as anyone else’s and there are certainly features of it – its expression of the unity of the church and its incorporation of lay leadership – that I think are in fact plainly taught in the Bible. But for me Presbyterian theology is much more essential than Presbyterian polity. But the new man may think differently and may be much more a Presbyterian loyalist than I am.

Tonight I want to consider another issue, also a matter of present disagreement concerning which I remain in the minority in our Presbyterian Church in America. I’m speaking of paedocommunion, that is, the practice of baptized, weaned covenant children participating in the Lord’s Supper. As you may know, there is abundant evidence that little children, in some cases nursing infants, were given the elements of the Lord’s Supper in early Christianity and that this practice continued into the 12<sup>th</sup> century, and ended for reasons that we ourselves would abominate. The children lost the Supper when Christians in general lost it, at least in its entirety, as a result of superstitious ideas that began to crowd around the sacrament. If the wine has become the very blood of Christ, one doesn’t want a child to spill it on the floor, and so on. At the Reformation no one was clamoring for children to be returned to the Lord’s Table and so they were not, with virtually nothing said about it one way or another.

Paedocommunion is a comparatively new idea in our circles. In fact, we can fairly date the appearance of the idea on our conservative Presbyterian landscape to the spring of 1975 when Christian Keidel, a PCA minister and then campus pastor with Inter Varsity Christian Fellowship, published an article in the *Westminster Theological Journal* entitled “Is the Lord’s Supper for Children?”

My own experience was the same as that of many other men at that time and since. I would have been inclined to answer Keidel’s question – “Is the Lord Supper for Children” – with a quick “No” and thought little more about it. I had always been taught that children were too young to examine themselves and so, naturally, the Lord’s Supper was only for those who, as the Larger

Catechism puts it, “as are of years and ability to examine themselves.” [Q. 177] The question never came up in a seminary class to my recollection and, given that we observed the Lord’s Supper only infrequently – in 1975 most of us only four times each year, or at the most once a month – we didn’t think much about the Supper. It wasn’t something clamoring for our attention. We were content with the way things were.

But as soon as I read Chris Keidel’s article I began to doubt the wisdom of what I had been taught. I hurried to check the standard Reformed authorities, but to my surprise, my reconnaissance of Reformed works on the Lord’s Supper turned up three facts that I reproached myself for not knowing before.

1. First, most of our men never talked about children at the Lord’s Supper. In most systematic theologies and in virtually all the books in my library devoted to the Lord’s Supper – admittedly few at that time – *the question was never raised*. And if it were raised, it was answered in a very superficial way, usually with simply a reference to 1 Corinthians 11:28 and Paul’s admonition that we examine ourselves before participating in the Lord’s Supper. But there must have been reasons, after all, why covenant children, Christian children, did partake of the Supper in early Christianity and for a thousand years after that – our Reformed men knew that they had – and why they had continued to do so until the later medieval period. But nothing was said about that evidence, no argument was made to refute it. That children ought not to come to the Table was considered too obvious a fact to need demonstration. When I went looking for a serious argument for our practice I couldn’t find one.

2. Second, our men also never talked about precisely what such self-examination would amount to and so when a child might be expected to be fit to participate in the Lord’s Supper. In the churches of my upbringing children began to take the Lord’s Supper at about fourteen years of age. That was the approximate standard in other Reformed churches as well, the Dutch Reformed churches, for example. But I could find no one who could explain why it was 14 and not 8; why 14 and not 21. This was a fixed part of our Christian life and practice in the Reformed world – that adolescents would at a certain point confess their faith and begin to take the Lord’s Supper – but it was a practice, a tradition without an argument, without even the bare suggestion that this had something to do with the teaching of the Bible. Apparently, so far as I could tell, we had taken over our practice of admitting 14 year olds to the Supper from the Jewish practice of *bar mitzvah*, though a boy becomes “bar mitzvah” at 13 and a girl becomes “bat mitzvah” at 12. However, neither of these customs originates in the Bible – there is no evidence for bar mitzvah in biblical times either in Scripture itself or in Jewish materials – and obviously not one of our ministers would ever have said that we took our practice from the Jews who had rejected Jesus!

3. Third, and this was to become a key discovery for me, as I read it became obvious to me that much of our *thinking about* the Lord’s Supper was the result of our *infrequent practice* of the Lord’s Supper. Practice often shapes conviction in ways we are scarcely conscious of. In fact, a good example of this phenomenon is that the fact that our children came to the Lord’s Supper at only at 14 years of age very strongly, however subtly, tended to make Presbyterian parents unsure whether they should think of their little children as already Christians or as people needing to become Christians. In the Presbyterianism of my youth, it was never entirely clear whether children in the church were already Christians or needed still to be converted to Christ.

Our theology required us to believe that they were and were to be treated as Christians, as members of Christ's church – the fact that they were baptized certainly meant nothing less than that – but in this matter of their waiting so long to participate in the Lord's Supper we seemed to be taking back with the left hand what had been given with the right. *Lex orandi, lex credendi*, the law of prayer or of worship is the law of faith. You can tell what people really believe by what they do. And we were acting in an important way as if our children weren't Christians.

In a similar way, if the Lord's Supper is, as it was in the churches of my upbringing, a ceremonious ritual of infrequent observance, something done rarely and not a part of our ordinary life or ordinary worship as Christians, something we could do mostly without because we did mostly without it, it was very easy to entertain ideas about the Supper that were wildly inconsistent with almost everything else we believed and did. Did we really think that the Supper operated according to different principles than everything else in our worship? Did we actually suppose that our children were capable of doing everything else but were not capable of doing this? Our little children learned to sing songs to God at home and in church, as I did. We learned to pray to God at home and in church, as I did. We learned to read the Word of God and listen to the preacher in church, as I did. As the years passed we gradually did all of those things better and better; life and learning are, after all, continuums that begin very early in in a child's life. All of those means of grace were a part of our life from as far back as we could remember, from the very beginning. But not the Lord's Supper! Apparently there was something different about that ritual, about that part of worship, something different that we did there that could be done only by adults. As soon as I realized that this was, in effect, what we were saying, my doubts became actual disagreement.

It is a simple fact that anyone and everyone comes to think about the Lord's Supper when it is observed every week as a regular and normal part of Christian worship, as regular and normal as the hymns, the prayers, and the sermon. When your Sunday worship always includes the Lord's Supper it becomes harder, much harder to distinguish it from the other parts of worship as if it operated according to different principles, as if only some people could participate in this part of worship. I think paedocommunion was the inevitable result of weekly communion. We include our children from the beginning and then exclude them at the end. Why? Where does the Bible say to do this?

So, with paedocommunion in my mind and with such questions demanding an answer, I began further study. I couldn't turn to any of my standard authorities because they either didn't treat the subject or dispensed with it in an altogether superficial way, a way utterly inadequate to answer the challenging questions I was now asking or to turn away the substantial attack on our longstanding practice that was being mounted by some of our men. And as I studied the question one pillar after another of my previous structure of belief began to fall.

1. Reformed people make a great deal of OT evidence in their argument for infant baptism. Covenant children were circumcised as infants in the ancient epoch; by what principal should they not be baptized in the new epoch? Circumcision was the seal of the righteousness that is by faith, says Paul. Is that not what baptism is? But circumcision was given to infants. The connection between the practice of circumcision and the practice of baptism was fundamental to our practice of infant baptism. *But what is good for the goose is good for the gander.* Little

children also participated in the sacramental feasts of the OT. They ate the Passover; they were included when the family went to the tabernacle or later the temple to eat the peace or fellowship offerings. What do we read in the Law of Moses?

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 fact, every time the liturgical regulation of the OT specifies what members of the family are welcome to participate in a sacred meal, *the children of the family are explicitly included!* Never anywhere in the Bible, OT or NT, are children said to be excluded by their age or immaturity. That is remarkable. What is more remarkable is that many of our Reformed authorities acknowledged that this was so. They argued that though little children were included in the sacred meals of the OT they were excluded from the NT Lord’s Supper. Well, if one is going to argue that, he needs to offer evidence. But the only evidence anyone ever offered was 1 Corinthians 11 and the remark of the Apostle Paul that those folk should examine themselves. As a Reformed Christian who believes absolutely in the unity of the covenant of grace, that there has always been from the beginning of history only one gospel, one salvation, one Savior, one faith, and one believing life, I needed to be persuaded that such a significant change had been introduced into the practice of the church’s sacramental life, all the more when the NT never says that there had been such a change and when we are never shown a covenant child, who would have been welcomed at the sacred feasts of the church in the ancient epoch, now in the new being prepared to participate for the first time when he or she was an adolescent. In fact, we don’t have even a whisper of such a practice until centuries after Christ.

2. Second, I rediscovered the biblical, even the Reformed doctrine of the covenant child. The fact is that in the Bible the children of the church by circumcision or baptism *belong to the church*, they are insiders, not outsiders. There is never some subsequent step after circumcision by which a covenant child, now grown older, enters on the full enjoyment of his or her privileges as a child of God. We may have long practiced the ritual of covenant children “joining the church” by professing their faith, that is what we called it, “joining the church” – presumably you can only join the church if you’re not already a member of the church – but such a step is unknown in the Bible. It never appears in any form, either by precept or by example. We Presbyterians have long had communicant and non-communicant church members, the latter term referring to baptized children not yet old enough to participate in the Lord’s Supper, but no one can cite chapter or verse for that practice. We’re Presbyterians, we’re Biblicists, we’re the ones who argue that we

stick with the Bible come wind, come weather. But we can't cite chapter or verse for a very important part of our congregational life. What is more, I discovered that in the Reformed tradition, though there were exceptions to this, the covenant child was not only regarded as a Christian, since he or she was a member of Christ's church by baptism, he or she was also considered to be *a believer*. Calvin had developed the doctrine of "the seed of faith," by which he meant the disposition to believe which God early plants in a Christian child's heart, a disposition which accounts for so much biblical evidence: 1) that John the Baptist could respond joyfully to the presence of Jesus while still in his mother's womb; 2) that in the Psalms we read of people who trusted in the Lord from infancy or from their mother's breast; 3) that the expectation in the Bible is that a covenant child will grow up in faith, not that he will only begin to believe at some point in his adolescence; and 4) that nurture or discipleship, not evangelism is the paradigm of child-rearing in a Christian home according to the Bible. All of this assumes that the little child is capable of receiving a ministry of discipleship, but discipleship requires the person to be a believer! The Bible assumes that a covenant child is from his or her infancy susceptible to Christian discipleship, that he or she has a faith to be nurtured and strengthened by instruction, discipline, and example.

*But, if that is so*, why would we teach our children the Word of God, why would we teach them the commandments of God, why would we teach them to pray, why would we bring all the means of grace to bear on our children's hearts and lives *except the Lord's Supper*. What was it about the Supper that made it useless or even harmful to our children when instruction in the Bible and the practice of prayer and of singing Christian hymns were part of their lives from virtually the very beginning? No one could answer that question for me with reference to anything in the Bible itself.

3. The argument was, as I said, that we were to examine ourselves and that little children couldn't do that. I began to doubt the relevance of this argument the first time I actually thought about it! Quite apart from the unassailable facts that Paul is neither discussing paedocommunion in 1 Corinthians 11 nor addressing himself to the subject of the general qualifications for participation in the Supper, the Apostle says nothing in correcting the abuse of the sacrament in the Corinthian church that the prophets did not say before him at a time when the participation of children in sacramental meals was not only permitted but ordered by the express statements of the Law of Moses. When Isaiah or Amos or Jeremiah accuse their contemporaries of an unworthy participation in worship, including sacramental worship, and call them to self-examination and repentance (e.g. Isa. 1:10-20; Amos 5:18-27; Jer. 7:1-29; Hos. 6:6; Mic. 6:8; 1 Sam. 15:22), they were certainly not setting aside the Law's requirement that God's people eat the sacrifices with their sons and daughters. Nor were they establishing a ritual requirement of self-examination, as if a prerequisite of participation in a sacramental meal was some spiritual exercise by which certain signs of sufficiently righteous living were to be detected and assurance of salvation thereby once again confirmed. The prophets were calling the people to repentance and reminding them that not only could no one worship God aright who had no intention of serving him with their lives, but that the hypocritical worship of rebels was deeply offensive to God and certain to be punished. They were not saying that one must have an adult-like faith in order to participate properly in the worship of God, they were not saying that a certain maturity of mental development was a prerequisite of right worship, and they were not saying that warnings addressed to adult sinners in the nature of the case excluded the little children of those

who came to God in faith. The application of Paul's admonition in 1 Corinthians 11 to the general question of the participation of children in the Lord's Supper was, I came to think, an obvious misuse of that text. Paul isn't talking about that. In fact, he doesn't say a thing that applies to the question.

More than that, the assumption of those who appealed to 1 Corinthians 11, seemed to be that little children, 2 years old, 3 years old 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. But mental and spiritual life 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 beginning is, we are everywhere taught in Holy Scripture, ordinarily found very early in the life of covenant children. As the Word is being 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. Given the long-standing emphasis of the Reformed tradition on the relationship between Word and sacrament, how the sacrament is a visible word, how we get nothing in the sacrament that we do not also get in the Word of God we just get the same thing in a different way, the inclusion of our children in the Supper seems not only inevitable but natural. Children very easily appreciate the eating and drinking, perhaps more easily than they can appreciate the Lord's Prayer that they memorize at home. Our practice of teaching our littlest children to pray, to say "Our Father..." but requiring them to wait years to eat the Savior's body and blood, I came to believe was an obvious inconsistency. It was a practice requiring an explanation clearer and more directly related to the actual statements of the Bible than had 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 1 Corinthians 11 requires self-examination by every participant prior to observing the Lord's Supper* – I don't think that is at all what Paul means, but even if it were – *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. Little children are capable of spiritual acts. The Bible says they are. And little children learn by doing!

So, I was convinced. As the paedocommunion idea began to pick up steam in our circles – in large part, I think, because more and more of us were observing the Lord's Supper every week – again, when you do that you suddenly have to explain why the children can do everything in the worship service *except the Lord's Supper* when, in some ways, the Supper is the easiest thing for a child to do – I say, as paedocommunion was embraced by more people, counter-arguments began to be published and these convinced me all the more that our traditional practice could not be defended from the Bible.

In the early 1980s the PCA decided to study the question and I was made the chairman of the study committee. I was a minority of one on the committee as an advocate of paedocommunion and so it fell to me to write the minority report in favor of admitting our baptized, weaned children to the Lord's Supper. As chairman it also fell to me to persuade another member of the

committee to write the committee report, the majority report, and I was able to persuade Professor Edmund Clowney to undertake the task. I was glad for that because I had immense respect for Dr. Clowney's theological acumen. Ed Clowney was a world-class theologian. I thought, if I'm missing something, if there really is a reason why our children should not take the Lord's Supper once they are capable of eating and drinking, Ed Clowney will find that reason and explain it. I distinctly remember the day when Dr. Clowney's paper arrived in my mailbox. I was the first to see it as he sent it to me as the chairman of the committee. I was so anxious to read it that I did so standing just inside my front door next to our dining room table. When I had finished reading I thought, "Well, I'm right after all." Dr. Clowney was too good an exegete and too careful a theologian to use bad arguments and the only argument he could offer in defense of our traditional practice was hypothetical. He admitted the superficiality of the Reformed argument against paedocommunion, he admitted that children did participate in sacramental meals in the ancient epoch and in early Christianity, but he asked, "In the heightening of fulfillment by which the New Covenant is related to the Old, is it not possible that the degree of required maturity could be heightened? Could not the transition from milk to solid food symbolize a spiritual maturity of a sort that the author of Hebrews so readily associates with this transition in diet?"

Well the answer to that question is, of course, "Yes, that is certainly possible." But where does the Bible actually say that there was any such a heightening and such a new degree of required maturity? If the ancient practice of children participating in the Passover – and the earliest Christians were Jews remember, whose children ate the Passover meal with their parents – I say if that practice was overturned, abrogated, done away with for spiritual and theological reasons, reasons having to do with the change from the ancient epoch to the new, the one introduced by Christ and his apostles, why is there no record of that and why did the early church, so far as the evidence goes, practice paedocommunion? Dr. Clowney had no answer for these questions. I have heard from other people who have told me that they read Dr. Clowney's report and concluded at once that paedocommunion must be the Bible's teaching. If Ed Clowney couldn't produce a better argument than that, there must not be a convincing argument. Dr. Clowney himself said that he was in *reluctant* disagreement with paedocommunion. He could see the strength of the argument and how deeply rooted it was in the Reformed doctrine of the church, of infant faith, of the covenant, and of the sacrament itself. But departing from a tradition of centuries is not easy.

So where does that leave me? With this question: why, 1) though children participated in the sacramental meals of the church in the ancient epoch; 2) though there is no teaching anywhere in the Bible to the effect that children are not to participate and no rationale provided according to which they would be excluded from the sacramental life of the community of which they are members and members who participate in all the other means of grace; 3) though in all the pages of Holy Scripture there is neither mention of covenant children beginning to participate in the sacramental meal they had not shared before nor instruction as to their preparation for taking such a step; 4) though there is no evidence in the Bible of our ritual of the profession of faith by covenant children; 5) though the New Testament reiterates the ancient theology of covenant children and introduces no new principle that might be applied to the question of the participation of covenant children in the Lord's Supper; 6) though the early church practiced paedocommunion so far as the evidence goes; and 7) though the Reformed doctrines of church

and sacrament furnish principles that would seem to require paedocommunion, *nevertheless* our children, members of the church and the objects of her nurture, should not be given this one means of grace. My mind is made up. Our children belong at the Lord's Table.

Still, the PCA does not approve of paedocommunion and so as loyal Presbyterians who have sworn to uphold our church law we do not practice paedocommunion here at Faith. We require a profession of faith before our children can come to the Lord's Table. That does not trouble me. A longstanding tradition will not be overturned in a few years. It takes time for the whole church to think the matter through and for minds to change. Young men are far more likely to change their minds than older men. It would probably not be wise to make a change like this too suddenly, before people understood and embraced the reasons for it. But our church law allows the elders to decide when any covenant child is ready to profess his or her faith and so we are free to take professions of faith earlier than used to be the norm, which is what we have done.

Interestingly, there are PCA churches who also take the professions of faith from five year olds who *do not* accept that paedocommunion is biblical. They agree that we used to wait far too long, but they still think it a biblical requirement that a profession of faith be made before a covenant child can come to the Lord's Table. That younger and younger children are coming to the table in PCA churches is a very positive sign. The practical effect is that our children will not remember a time when they were not welcome at the Lord's Supper. They will grow up at the Lord's Table, which is what I believe is what ought to be the case. I love to see our families coming to the table of the Lord together; it is so eminently biblical and so consistent with what we believe to be the Bible's doctrine of the church, the covenant, and the Christian child. The Lord is pouring his grace into the hearts of our children in every way, the Supper included.

The number of ministers who approve of paedocommunion in the PCA and other Reformed communions continues to grow, though there remains in a few corners of the church some fierce opposition. It is now supported by some of our seminary professors in the PCA which was not true when the debate began in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It is a position now given respect in writing on the Lord's Supper. So I'm confident of its prospects in the future. The biblical/theological argument is too strong; the argument against it is too contrived. But today a man entering the PCA ministry must register an exception if he is an advocate of paedocommunion and his presbytery must be willing to grant that exception, as almost all PCA presbyteries now are. Paedocommunion is not the law of our church and probably won't be for some years to come, but I think its day is coming.

With so many young children taking the Lord's Supper here I don't suppose that we will call a man who strongly disagrees with the practice of paedocommunion and wants to reintroduce the practice of taking professions only when a covenant child has reached adolescence. But it is certainly possible that we may call a man who is not an advocate of paedocommunion. At the present moment there are still many fewer such advocates in our church than not. These are the circumstances we face in our historical moment and it is our duty cheerfully to accept them.