

Young Child Communion?

This article is not about paedocommunion, the practice of admitting young covenant children to the Lord's Table by virtue of their covenant membership. For more about paedocommunion I recommend reading the report of the study committee of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church submitted to their 55th General Assembly

I am here concerned to question young-child communion, the position that children 8 to 11 or even as young as 4 can make profession of faith and be admitted to the Lord's Supper on the basis of a public profession of faith. My hesitations with regard to this practice are not because there are no young covenant children who are born again, nor because toddlers and little children cannot believe. I am confident that many covenant children are regenerated at a very early age.

I have difficulty with the idea of children making credible public profession of faith, even with regard to many who do so at age 12. Let me just look back at my own life. There was no time at which I did not consider myself to be a believer, but could I properly profess my faith in the same sense as is expected of adults who join the church (even though it be understood to be at a child's level of understanding)? I think of a time when I had a ferocious running debate with my oldest sister. I insisted that the right pronunciation of mischievous was "mis CHEE vee us". Why did I insist on this? Because that was how my teacher pronounced it. I was thinking for myself with much conviction, but I was really just basing my convictions on my trust in my teacher. I also think of when I was around 12 and our pastor in Canada got the wild idea that church services should be in English rather than Dutch. I protested. Full of conviction (seated on a plow, with no one listening) I had some long debates defending my strong opinion that we needed to keep our services in Dutch. My convictions were certainly firm ones, but did they have a sound basis? Can a child really confess his faith in a way that is analogous to adult profession of faith? Of course, covenant children do repent and do have real faith, but I don't think it's right to try to pour their expression of faith into an adult mold of public profession of faith. I know of six to twelve year old covenant children who express their faith to parents and teachers, but (when anxious for the Bible class to be over) make comments like, "I don't want to study Bible stories. I don't believe them." This does not suggest to me that such children do not believe, just that it is inappropriate to apply the concept of "credible profession of faith" at this age.

I wonder if Proverbs 10:13 is helpful: "On the lips of him who has understanding, wisdom is found, but a rod is for the back of him who lacks sense." Might we say that at an age when physical discipline may still be largely necessary, a child has not truly reached an age of understanding that is appropriate for "credible profession of faith"?

A child generally thinks according to how he is trained by his parents. If they seriously lead him to believe that there is a Santa Claus, the child accepts that. Although children are also rebellious and have a mind of their own (both in obedience and disobedience), there is a real sense in which their opinions are not based on independent decision. They largely follow their parents and accept what they are taught. That is a good thing and that is how it

needs to be. This dependence on the parents is duly expressed in covenant membership of children being on the basis of their belonging to their parents and not on the basis of childlike faith. Consequently, their fellowship in Christ and expression of it is together with their parents. This was demonstrated in the Old Testament in the family going to Jerusalem year by year for family participation in sacrificial meals. If children participate in the Lord's Supper as independently confessing their faith before the church elders a different pattern is introduced.

Young child communion seems to me to confuse covenant authority relationships. If a child makes public profession of faith at a young age, what does that suggest with regard to being under his or her parents' covenant headship? Do the parents still exercise authority over the child or is the child now on his or her own responsibility? Also, I wonder about what such participation in the Lord's Supper says to other covenant children. More intellectually gifted or verbally adept children will tend to make profession of faith sooner. Should the shy and those who mature more slowly be given to understand that they do not yet believe and cannot be assured of the forgiveness of their sins?

There comes a point at which the child takes on independent responsibilities of faith in the Lord, probably around 16 and older. It is then also appropriate for the young adult to vote in the church. I think it is inappropriate for a 12-yr old to vote for the election of office bearers, etc. That is a responsibility too heavy for him (which also shows the inappropriateness of an adultlike profession of faith at age 12 or less). The biblical basis for such a public profession of faith is seen in the Bible's teaching about covenant-making. God calls his people to declare commitment to him and his covenant. When they attain maturity and take on independent (from their parents) membership in the covenant, the children appropriately express this through public profession of faith (Matt 10:32,33; Rom 10:9,10; 1 Tim 6:12).

For years before I became a communicant member of the church at age 17, I understood the meaning of the Lord's Supper and believed that what it expresses also applied to me, since I knew that my sins were forgiven in Christ. Although I did not physically partake, I did do so mentally and spiritually. I said to myself, "Christ's words in the Supper are being addressed to me and not just to my parents." I suggest this properly reflects the scriptural teaching about covenant children. They are represented by their parents and I suggest it would be a good thing for the Church to explicitly teach children that their parents represent them when partaking of the Sacrament and that Christ's words in the Supper are addressed also to believing children, repentant, obedient covenant children, not just to adults.