

Children And Communion: A Case Study

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Traditionally, in a Baptist context, the Lord's Table is for the Lord's people. The Table is 'open' to all who love the Lord Jesus Christ and are seeking to follow him, but the assumption is that those who come to the Table are in a committed 'covenant relationship' with his people. We enter into that covenant relationship when we commit ourselves to the Lord and his people through baptism and church membership.

Although they may well love the Lord Jesus and may well in their own way be seeking to follow him, children are not encouraged to take bread and wine: communion is for the baptised. In most Baptist churches communion is not even an issue for children, for the simple reason they are almost always in their Sunday School classes while the Lord's Supper is being celebrated in the church.

Precisely because the children are not normally present at communion, the Lord's Supper tends to become something of a 'mystery'. The children see the Table laid, but they never see the action of eating and drinking. In our church, we thought it would be helpful to introduce the children to the Lord's Supper by occasionally bringing the children back into church for the communion service. But if they are not able to eat bread and wine, how can we ensure that they do not remain passive spectators? We have experimented in various ways. Most recently we used a liturgy, which encouraged the children (as well as the congregation as a whole) to engage in a series of responsive readings and prayers. To make matters simple, the readings and prayers were all put up on the screen.

For your interest I reproduce the liturgy, which we used on the day of our church anniversary. The children had been in the service for the opening 20 minutes of worship. They had gone to their own teaching sessions while the adult congregation listened to the Scriptures and to the exposition of the Scriptures. The children then returned in the singing of a hymn after the sermon.

Immediately before the Lord's Supper we had the giving of the Peace. I am aware that in some traditions the Peace comes after the eating of Bread and drinking of Wine. However, in our context,

this is the moment when, if necessary, worshippers are able to put relationships right (see Matt 5.23-24).

Following the peace, we started the communion liturgy. The words in italics were used by me in my role as worship leader ('president'). The words in bold were used by the congregation. The words in bold italics were used as headings on the screen.

Jesus invites us to come to him

(The Lord's Supper begins with an invitation. Usually I say 'This is the Lord's Table, and it is the Lord Jesus who invites all those who love him and seek to follow him to come, eat and drink'. On this occasion we were all involved in the invitation.)

The Lord Jesus says: Come to me, all of you who are tired from carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest. Come to me, all of you who are thirsty, and you will never thirst again. Come to me all you who are hungry, and you will never be hungry again".

Jesus invites us all, young and old, to come to him. In particular he invites you children to come and know his love. As the bread is served, we invite you to come to the front and receive a blessing from Martin and David who will be either side of this Table to pray for you. Parents with babies are also welcome to bring them.

Jesus wants us to remember him

(Normally I read the Words of Institution as found in 1 Cor 11.23-26. On this occasion I used a simpler form of words.)

The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took a piece of bread. He thanked God and, as he broke it, said: "This is my body, broken for you. Do this to remember me."

Thank you Jesus for loving me

After the supper Jesus took the cup of wine. He thanked God and said: "This is my blood, the blood of the new agreement between God and his people, poured out for you. Do this to remember me."

Thank you Jesus for loving me

Let us continue to thank Jesus for his love

(Instead of a formal Prayer of Thanksgiving led by one of the deacons, we said together the words of a simple song.)

You went to Calvary, there you died for me

Thank you Jesus for loving me

You rose up from the grave, to me new life you gave

Thank you Jesus for loving me

You're coming back again, and we with you shall reign

Thank you Jesus for loving me

We remember Jesus as we break bread.

(The Bread was broken and distributed. We ate the Bread as we received it as a sign that each one of us must come one by one to the foot of the Cross. During the serving of the bread the children came forward for prayer.)

(After eating the bread we used words from Gal 2.20)

*Together we say: **The Son of God loved me and gave himself for me***

We remember Jesus as we drink wine

(The Wine was served. While waiting until all were served before drinking together, as a sign of our oneness in Christ, we sang a song - 'Wonderful grace'. After drinking the wine we used words from Eph 1.6,7)

*Together we say: **By the blood of Christ we are set free, that is, our sins are forgiven. How great is the grace of God!***

We pray for others

(In a Baptist church there is normally a pastoral prayer at this point. My pastoral prayers always begin with the needs of the local fellowship, then go on to include the needs of the world, before ending with a prayer of rededication. On this occasion the prayers were simplified into a few responsive sentences.)

Gathered together around the table, let us pray for our church family – and in particular let us pray for those who are unwell....

Lord, bless all our friends who are unwell

At this time when we are looking for another minister, let us pray for God's wisdom and direction

Lord, bless our church and in your time provide us with a new minister

At a time when many are losing their jobs and finding finances are tight, let us pray for the government as it seeks to deal with the problems of recession

Lord, bless all those who have responsibility for the wellbeing of our country

In this Christian Aid week when we remember those less fortunate than ourselves, let us pray for all who lack food and shelter

Lord, bless all those who seek to help the poor

On this church anniversary Sunday let us pray for ourselves in the prayer of Richard of Chichester:

Thanks be to you, Lord Jesus Christ, for all the benefits you have won for me; for all the pains and insults you have borne for me. O most merciful Redeemer, Friend and Brother, may I know you more clearly, love you more dearly, and follow you more nearly, day by day.

(The service ended with a resurrection hymn and the saying of the Grace together as a prayer for one another – as we say the Grace we bind hands together as a sign of our oneness in Jesus.)

Response from Alun Brookfield:

Paul's experiments with Holy Communion are determined by his Baptist context. I'm impressed by the quality and thoughtfulness of his approach to the question of children and Holy Communion. He has clearly borrowed material and ideas from a number of different traditions and has done so with integrity and wisdom.

In an Anglican setting, we also have difficulties with children and Holy Communion, but it is customary (in my parish at least) for the Sunday School to come back into church to receive a blessing. However, it is probable that the children will not be present for the Eucharistic thanksgiving, so we still have the same challenge of a lack of familiarity with or understanding of the liturgy. Given the rules under which Anglican clergy operate with regard to the content of liturgy, it may be that the only way we could overcome this would be to invite the children to stay in throughout the Eucharistic thanksgiving, but to build in some additional explanations (which might be appreciated as much by the adults as by the children!).

The greater challenge facing us as Anglicans is that of whether it is appropriate for children to receive the bread and wine before confirmation. At this point we face something of an inherent contradiction between theology and practice. Our theology is that we baptise a child into Christ, therefore making them full partakers and members of the body of Christ. Theologically therefore, there can be no objection to them receiving the elements of Holy Communion. But our practice is that we make them wait until they have undergone confirmation – a sort of spiritual ‘rite of passage’ (described by one writer as “a useful practice in search of a theology”). There seems to be in this inherent contradiction a recognition that faith is not as vicarious nor as effective as our baptismal service makes it appear, and that a certain level of understanding and consent is required before that which was implicit in infant baptism can be expressed through a mature and fully participative involvement in the Eucharist.

There is some anecdotal evidence that children who are admitted to the Eucharist before confirmation are more likely to stay connected to the church as they progress through puberty, but, for the moment, the jury is still out on whether to fully and wholeheartedly embrace infant baptism as a full and sufficient qualification for Holy Communion. Let the debate continue!

Fishing Nets or Safety Nets?

Remodelling church to connect with the unchurched

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As I go around the country learning what is happening in evangelism, mission and church planting, I sometimes wonder whether we are fooling ourselves. There is much activity, but what is truly happening out there? Are we just creating more places where bored or exhausted or cynical Christians can be kept safe or happy? Or are we creating new Christian communities that are connecting with people way out of the churches normal orbit and enabling them to become fully functioning disciples of Christ?