

Children and the Lord's Supper

An unapologetic apology for children to receive communion.

"Let the little children come to me and do not turn them away for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven." Mark 10:14

"The Body of Christ given for you."... But not for you?

I change the channel each time a program comes on showing small children with distended bellies, the first sign of malnutrition and a prelude to famine. It is so painful to watch and it makes one feel helpless. And while it bothers me to see starving adults as well, it is the children that catch my eye first and grab my heart. I am thankful that some of the money we give at Church goes to help feed the truly hungry, that we have our food program of New Leaven and that some of the missionaries we support are actively helping hungry people improve their lot in life.

But while alleviating famine is important, so is ministering to spiritual hunger. Physical deprivation is obvious, but spiritual starvation is not as easy to spot. It is not accidental that Jesus instituted the last supper as the sign of his presence with us. Jesus was always eating dinner with someone! And somehow he miraculously feeds us through the Lord's Supper.

In the Bible in Exodus chapter 12 verses 26 and 27 we read "When your children ask you "What do you mean by this observance?" you shall say, "It is the Passover of the Lord, for he passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt, when he struck down the Egyptians but spared our houses."

The celebration of God's deliverance was and is the most important Jewish family event. Adults and children gather to remember that God saved their ancestors by mighty acts many years ago. The whole family eats together and celebrates. The Christian Passover feast is also meant to be a family event. We are to teach our children that the Lord's Supper is a sign of the saving acts that Jesus accomplished in his sacrifice and resurrection.

So too, our children should be the first to eat the Lord's Supper with us. Jesus somehow brings his presence to us with the simple gifts of bread and wine. We would not think of withholding food from our children, and yet we often withhold spiritual food from them at communion.

I find that I am troubled each time a baptized child reaches out for communion and then is told by a parent they cannot receive. The message we teach is that only adults can eat at the Lord's Table. And yet if only adults ate at our own dinner tables then all of us would starve in our infancy.

There is little about children in the New Testament, but what little we have points to Jesus unconditional blessing of them with his presence and love. And he chastises the disciples who try to keep the children out of his presence.

Perhaps like me you were taught that children should not receive communion until they can understand. As I get older I realize that I understand the Lord's Supper less and less with my head and more and more I simply accept the mystery that somehow, through the simple signs of bread and wine, Jesus feeds and strengthens me. And I believe that he will feed and strengthen our children as well.

If God's grace depended upon our intellect than none of us could ever receive it. In fact if intellectual understanding is critical to grace then we should also refrain from baptizing infants who most certainly do not understand what is happening.

Fortunately God's grace can sometimes simply be grasped with our hands and lips. So when we come to the Lord's Table let the children come and let us not hinder them...."for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven."

A final word is in order here. Instruction regarding communion is important. Children do need to be taught reverence, and eventually self-examination, and finally some theology about Holy Communion. Initiation ceremonies are also important. If children start receiving communion early, it is still important for children of 2nd through 4th grade level to have a ceremony similar to First Communion where their participation is formally recognized.

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