

Babies, Bread, and Wine:

Paedo-Communion in the First Three Hundred Years of Church History

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Introduction

Is paedo-communion *the* historical practice of the church? In the modern debate over the practice of paedo-communion church history plays an important part, as it should. While never primary or determinative for our theology and practice church history certainly carries much secondary and informative weight in our discussions. The purpose of this paper will be to look to the first three hundred years of church history and discern if the historical evidence favors the practice of credo-communion or paedo-communion. Our arguments must ultimately rest in the Scriptures themselves. Nevertheless, if the testimony of the early church is unanimous or even heavily tilted toward one side or the other, then that is a voice that must be honored and given serious consideration.

This paper will concentrate on three primary sources from the first 300 years as an attempt to discern the early church's voice on this issue of paedo vs credo communion. Now, it must be admitted up front that there are other sources which both sides appeal to from the first three hundred years of church history. However, these sources are not nearly as relevant as the three which will be dealt with in this paper. First, some of their statements simply require too much inference to be persuasive either way. Ignatius' comments would fall into this category.¹ Second, some of their statements are too vague to carry any real weight in the debate. Origen's comments on a section from the Book of Judges would fall into this category.² Lastly, some

¹ Ignatius, *Epistle to the Philadelphians: Chapter 4* (Peabody: Hendrickson, repr. 2004), 81.

² Origen, *Homilies on the Book of Judges 6:2*. As quoted in Leonard J. Coppes, *Daddy, May I Take Communion* (Thornton: Leonard J. Coppes, 1988), 41.

quotations that may be relevant are contained in works which are hotly debated as to their date and composition. The Apostolic Constitutions would fall into this last category.³

This paper will focus on quotations from Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, and Cyprian of Carthage. Their quotations will be set before the reader in their historical and literary context. This will be mixed with interpretation that focuses on the implications of their comments in so far as they bare on the communion debate. This paper will seek to show that the evidence from the first three hundred years of church history does not heavily favor either side in the modern debate. This is because the sources that will be examined result in a historical tie. In light of this conclusion, a final exhortation will be given to the church to hold fast to *sola scriptura* as the final and ultimate authority for our theology and practice.

Sources from the First Three Hundred Years

Justin Martyr (110-165 AD)

Our historical investigation begins in “The First Apology.” Justin states very clearly his purpose for writing this apology. He is addressing and petitioning the civil leaders of the Roman empire in regards to the unjust hatred, slander, and abuse that he and his fellow christians are experiencing. His desire is that an objective inspection of the lives and teachings as set forth in his apology would be made and an unbiased judgement passed.⁴ Remembering this context will be helpful.

³ A. Cleveland Coxe, “Introductory Notice to Constitutions of the Holy Apostles,” in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, 10 Volumes (Peabody: Hendrickson, repr. 2004), 7:387-390. See also Needham’s discussion of the date and compilation of the Apostolic Constitutions in, Nick Needham, “Children at the Lord’s Table in the Patristic Era,” in *Children and the Lord’s Supper*, ed. Guy Waters and Ligon Duncan (Geanies House: Christian Focus, 2011), 153-155.

⁴ Justin Martyr, “The First Apology,” in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, 10 Volumes (Peabody: Hendrickson, repr. 2004), 1:163.

One more important contextual note must be made before we set forth his words concerning our topic. In Chapter LXI Justin begins to speak about Baptism. He states:

I will also relate *the manner in which we dedicated ourselves to God when we had been made new through Christ*: lest if we omit this, we seem to be unfair in the explanation we are making. *As many as are persuaded and believe that what we teach and say is true, and undertake to live accordingly*, are instructed to pray and to entreat God with fasting, for the remission of their sins that are past, we praying and fasting with them. Then *they* are brought by us where there is water, and *are regenerated in the same manner in which we were ourselves regenerated*.⁵

In this section it is clear that *adult converts* are in view. This is important to note. In Chapters LXII-LXIV comments are made about the imitation by demons, how God appeared to Moses, and further misrepresentations of the truth of Christian baptism. Chapter LXV is a continuation of this section as evidenced by its first words, “*But we.*” There is no break in thought. In Chapters LXV and LXVI the line of thought is still that of new adult converts. Justin’s comments relative to our topic in these chapters are as follows:

But we, after we have thus washed *him who has been convinced and has assented to our teaching, bring him to the place where those who are called brethren are assembled* ... And when the president has given thanks, and all the people have expressed their assent, those who are called by us deacons give to each of those present to partake of the bread and wine mixed with water over which the thanksgiving was pronounced, and to those who are absent they carry away a portion. And this food is called among us Eucharist, *of which no one is allowed to partake but the man who believes that the things which we teach are true, and who has been washed with the washing that is for the remission of sins, and unto regeneration, and who is so living as Christ has enjoined*.⁶

These quotations, from Chapter LXI and from LXV-LXVI, ought to make clear that he does not have the issue of paedocommunion on his mind at all. This means that when he makes the comment that, “no one is allowed to partake *but the man who believes,*” he is saying that

⁵ Martyr, *First Apology*, 1:183. Emphasis added.

⁶ Martyr, *First Apology*, 1:185. Emphasis added.

unbelievers, those who have not been baptized, may not partake of the Eucharist. He is not speaking in any way to the issue of baptized adults versus baptized infants, but to baptized adults versus unbaptized adults. For this reason Justin's comments do not support those who oppose paedocommunion. They cannot. The context will not allow it. He must be considered a neutral source. Therefore, Justin ought to be left on the sideline in the debate over paedocommunion.⁷

Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-219 AD)

Next, we have two quotations from Clement of Alexandria that have implications for the issue at hand. First, in his work "The Instructor" Clement begins by giving practical instruction on the issues of eating and drinking. After discussing the benefits of drinking water instead of wine for temperance sake he discusses why water is mixed with wine in the Lord's cup. It is here that he states "And the mixture of both — of the water and of the Word — is called Eucharist, renowned and glorious grace; and they who *by faith* partake of it are sanctified both in body and in soul."⁸

⁷ Peter Leithart in his book "Daddy, why was I excommunicated" also points out the weaknesses inherent in using Justin's quotes as if they favor the position of credo-communion. He seems correct when he points out that to use Justin here to oppose paedocommunion is to be forced to take Justin's earlier comments about baptism as also opposing paedobaptism. For as the quotations above show Justin says that not only those who believe are allowed to partake of the supper, but also that only those who believe are baptized. Leithart states (correctly, I believe) that "neither Ignatius nor Justin furnishes us with the evidence we are looking for" to settle the debate. Even if we disagree with Leithart on the issue of paedocommunion we would do well not to put forth Justin's quotes as supportive of our position. He simply is not speaking to the issue. We should use only the strongest arguments if we desire to be truly persuasive. See Peter J. Leithart, *Daddy, why was I excommunicated?* (Niceville: Transfiguration Press, 1992), 38. Blake Purcel sees Justin's statement that "each of those present" partook as implying infant communion since baptized infants would have been present. This is not a very persuasive inference though, because just prior to this statement Justin identifies "those present" as those who have just expressed their assent. This would exclude infants. Purcel is trying to find an implication where there is not one. See Blake Purcel, "The Testimony of the Ancient Church," in *The Case for Covenant Communion*, ed. Gregg Strawbridge (Monroe: Athanasius Press, 2006), 133-134.

⁸ Clement of Alexandria, "The Instructor," in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, 10 Volumes (Peabody: Hendrickson, repr. 2004), 2:242. Emphasis added.

Second, in “The Stromata” as he discusses the usefulness of written compositions and how each individual should judge himself in regards to making use of them, that is whether one prefers to utilize writing or speech, he states the following:

Both must therefore test themselves: the one, if he is qualified to speak and leave behind him written records; the other, if he is in a right state to hear and read: as also some in the dispensation of the Eucharist, according to custom, enjoin that each one of the people individually should take his part. *One’s own conscience is best for choosing accurately or shunning. And its firm foundation is a right life, with suitable instruction.* But the imitation of those who have already been proved, and who have led correct lives, is most excellent for understanding and practice of the commandments. ‘So whosoever shall eat the bread and drink the cup of the Lord unworthily, shall be guilty of the body of the blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup.’”⁹

As with Justin, it must be admitted that Clement is not discussing the issue of paedocommunion. However, his comments in both of the above quotations are made in writings that are addressed to Christians. This is important because unlike Justin, Clement is not contrasting the believer versus the unbeliever. His comments are more general in nature. For this reason they do seem to have implications for the debate. According to the quotation from “The Instructor” it is “by faith” that the partakers of the Supper are sanctified. From Clement’s statement it is clear that he did not hold to an *ex opere operato* view of the Supper. He saw the Supper as a means of grace to the believer that partook of it by faith. This would require the ability to believe and trust in certain truths and promises. This would also require the ability to understand something about what is being presented to the believer in the Supper. An infant simply is not mentally capable of such things. This being the case it would be rather strange for Clement to make this statement while also holding to the practice of paedocommunion.

⁹ Clement of Alexandria, “The Stromata,” in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, 10 Volumes (Peabody: Hendrickson, repr. 2004), 2:300. Emphasis added.

In regards to the quotation from “The Stromata,” Matthew Winzer offers the following helpful summary of the implications of Clement’s words:

The following is to be observed from the father’s words: (a.) That each individual has the responsibility to choose or to shun the Eucharist. (b.) That it is only by the testimony of an individual’s conscience that such a determination can be made. (c.) That a right life and suitable knowledge is foundational for participation in the Eucharist. (d.) That all of this is according to custom. (e.) And this is in accord with Paul’s words to the Corinthians, which requires self-examination.¹⁰

If the above inferences are correct the necessary implication would be that infants ought not to partake of the supper. If the inferences are correct it would also seem to imply that it is unlikely that Clement was aware of, or at the very least personally in favor of, infants partaking of the Supper.¹¹

Cyprian of Carthage (c. 250 AD)

Next, we come to two quotations from Cyprian in his Treatise III “On the Lapsed.” In this treatise, he is dealing with the issues that arose after the Decian persecution which had splintered the early church into two camps: the confessors and the lapsed. The lapsed were those who had given in to the persecution, sacrificed to idols, and denied Christ. In Cyprian’s eyes, once they had sacrificed to idols, they had partnered with wickedness. They had become polluted and corrupt.¹² Their apostasy had even opened some to demonic possession.¹³ He believed that this

¹⁰ Matthew Winzer, “The True History of Paedo-Communion.” *The Confessional Presbyterian* Volume 3 (2007): 29-30. <https://www.cpjournl.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/Winzer-HistoryPaedocommunion.pdf>

¹¹ Cornelis Venema comes to similar conclusions regarding the implications of Clement’s comments. See Cornelis P. Venema, *Children at the Lord’s Table?*, (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2009), 13.

¹² Cyprian of Carthage, “Treatise III: On the Lapsed,” in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, 10 Volumes (Peabody: Hendrickson, repr. 2004), 5:439, 443.

¹³ Cyprian, *Lapsed*, 5:443-444.

had brought upon the lapsed judgement both in this life and in the life to come. He saw this temporal punishment as a sign from the Lord given to correct those who would heed it. With this context in mind, we will take a more detailed look at two of Cyprian's most relevant statements to the topic of this paper.

In paragraph nine Cyprian speaks of the lapsed sealing their own destruction and pledging their own death by "turns in the deadly cup," that is the pagan sacrifice.¹⁴ As if this was not terrible enough, others were exhorted to partake with them, and infants were carried by their parents and made to partake of the deadly cup with them. Of this reality, Cyprian states that when these infants were made partakers of this pagan sacrifice they "lost, while yet little ones, what in the beginning of their nativity they had gained." "Gained," here clearly refers to eternal life. In the Ante-Nicene Father's translation of Cyprian, an editorial footnote is inserted after this statement, which claims that "the baptism of infants seems now to be general, and also the communion of infants."¹⁵ It is possible that Cyprian has only baptism in mind as the means by which the infant had gained eternal life. However, based on what will be seen below it is certainly possible that Cyprian has both sacraments in view. He then goes on to paint an imaginary scene in which these infants stand before the Lord on Judgement day and condemn their parents for having "murdered" them and caused them to be condemned. They say:

We have done nothing; nor have we forsaken the Lord's bread and cup to hasten freely to a profane contact; the faithlessness of others has ruined us. We have found our parents our murderers; they have denied to us the Church as a Mother; they have denied God as a Father: so that while we were little, and unforeseeing, and unconscious of such a crime, we were associated by others to the partnership of wickedness, and were snared by the deceit of others.

¹⁴ Cyprian, *Lapsed*, 5:439. All quotations in this paragraph are taken from paragraph nine on page 5:439.

¹⁵ Editors Footnote 6, 5:439.

They point out that they were not the ones who had consciously forsaken the Eucharist, the Church, and God the Father, but that their parents bore the responsibility for this. In this imaginary scene Cyprian's own beliefs come through. Though these infants were unconscious of partaking in the deadly cup, he believed that it was a crime on their account and that by it they were partnered with wickedness. This fact will be important to keep in mind as we look at the next section relevant to our discussion.

Of this section though it must be said that no hard proof for infant communion can be found. As was noted above, Cyprian could simply be speaking of baptism as the means by which infants gained eternal life. The statement that they had not "forsaken the Lord's bread and cup" in no way requires one to take this as a reference to them having been kept from it in their infancy. It is simply a plea that they had been robbed of their membership in the church and the means of grace by the wickedness of their parents. A person born into a Presbyterian and Reformed Church today who was led astray into paganism by their parents in infancy could make a similar claim, even though these churches do not practice paedocommunion.

However, for those who want a smoking gun in favor of paedocommunion in the early church may have it in Cyprian's next section we will address. After pleading with the lapsed to repent and so escape the punishment of the Lord Cyprian notes that the Lord has punished some and given them over to various torments, which serve as an example to all. Then, in paragraph twenty five, he recounts a scene in which he personally witnessed one such example of punishment and torment.¹⁶ Certain parents, who were fleeing, had left their baby with a nurse who then gave the baby to the magistrate. The magistrate gave this baby "in the presence of an

¹⁶ Cyprian, *Lapsed*, 5:444. All quotations in this paragraph are quoted from paragraph 25 page 5:444.

idol...bread mingled with wine.” This bread and wine had been part of a sacrifice offered to idols. At some point the mother recovered her child and brought her into the assembly when the church was partaking of the Eucharist. Cyprian also notes that the child had been, at the point of receiving the bread and wine offered to idols, and at the point in which her mother received her back, too young to be able to stop it or to speak about the “crime that had been committed.” At this point, we should note the similarities with the section we commented on above. In both, there is an infant partaking unwillingly and unknowingly of a sacrifice offered to idols. In both, Cyprian calls this a crime. We can infer then that Cyprian also saw this infant, as he saw the first, as having been made a partaker with wickedness by the deeds of another. He goes on to note how the infant began to cry and wail during the Eucharist, attributing it to the fact that the child somehow was confessing its unworthiness to be in the midst of the saints as they offered prayer and supplication. The infant was somehow conscious of its having been polluted and made a partaker with wickedness by its being given the bread and wine sacrificed to idols. After the prayers were ended he notes, “the deacon began to offer the cup to those present, and when, as the rest received it, *its turn approached*, the little child, by the instinct of the divine majesty, turned away its face, compressed its mouth with resisting lips, and refused the cup.”¹⁷ Two things must be noted. First, the statement “its turn,” seems to rather strongly imply that the infant was part of the normal rotation. Simply put, the infant had a recognized turn in being offered the cup. Second, he states that the infant “refused the cup” not because it was too young, not because it had somehow rationally considered the matter, but by the instinct of the divine majesty. Cyprian goes on to state that the deacon persisted and forced some of the wine into the infant. However,

¹⁷ Emphasis Added.

the infant immediately began to vomit. He notes that “in a profane body and mouth the Eucharist could not remain.” He attributes this vomiting by the infant, like the instinct to turn its head, to the Lord’s power. In Cyprian’s eyes the Lord would not allow this infant’s body to partake of the Eucharist because it had been polluted by the bread and wine sacrificed to idols. The relevant point to note in regards to our discussion is that Cyprian does not condemn the deacon nor does he say the Lord caused the wine to be vomited because the child was an infant and thus not worthy based on age. The infant in Cyprian's eyes was not worthy only because it had been polluted. It would seem then that the comments in this second section of Cyprian seem to give clear evidence to the practice of infant communion in the third century. It also seems clear that Cyprian had no issue with its practice.¹⁸ This does not mean that it was necessarily a universal practice in the church at this time. It simply means that by the middle of the third century the practice did exist.

Conclusion

We have given a brief overview and interpretation of the most relevant quotations from three fathers during the first three hundred years of church history that pertain to the issue of paedocommunion. Justin Martyr has been shown to be a neutral source. Though both sides in the modern debate seek to bring Justin onto their side it has been shown that taken in context he simply must be left on the side lines. To pull him in on either side simply does not do justice to

¹⁸ Matthew Winzer argues for a different interpretation of Cyprian’s comments that would paint him as actually unfavorable to the practice of paedocommunion. Although this writer agrees with Winzer that paedocommunion is not the biblical practice, he can not follow Winzer’s interpretation of Cyprian at this point. See (Winzer, “True History,” 31-32). Both Leonard Coppes and Cornelis Venema, who argue against paedocommunion, admit that Cyprian’s comments must be understood as evidence for the practice in his time. See (Coppes, *Daddy*, 42); and (Venema, *Children*, 14-15).

the general context of the First Apology, nor to the particular section in which he speaks of the Supper.

Clement of Alexandria on the other hand has been shown to be a source that can be quoted favorably by those who hold to a credo-communion position. Clement speaks of the need for faith in order for the Supper to be a means of grace to any who would partake. He then goes on to speak about the need to examine one's own conscience as they choose to partake of the Supper or not. If this is the proper interpretation of his comments then the necessary inference is that infants ought not to partake since they can not understand the Supper nor examine their own conscience.

Cyprian, however, has been shown to be a source that can be quoted favorably by those who hold to a paedocommunion position. He speaks of an infant having a "turn" during the Supper. He in no way condemns the action of the deacon who not only offered the cup to the infant, but even forced the infant to partake of some of the wine. Cyprian condemns none of this. He instead praises the power and majesty of the Lord for not allowing an unclean vessel to partake of the holy Supper. It seems necessary to infer that paedocommunion was at minimum an accepted practice in some parts of the church by the middle of the third century.

Both sides of the debate admit that paedocommunion became the common practice of the church in the east and west by the fourth century and even continues in Eastern Orthodoxy to the present day.¹⁹ How or why this came to be common practice is a debated issue. Some believe it was due mainly to the church coming to view the sacraments as conferring saving grace in and

¹⁹ Venema, *Children*, 18-19.

by themselves — *ex opere operato*.²⁰ While this may be the case, that debate must be left for another paper. The purpose of this paper has been to investigate the most relevant statements of the first three hundred years and to discern what, based on the extant historical comments alone, can be discerned regarding the early church's practice of paedocommunion. The conclusion seems to be clear. Of the three sources cited one was neutral in the debate, one was favorable toward credo-communion, and the last was favorable toward paedocommunion. Therefore, based on the sources we have from the first three hundred years, it must be conceded that the debate over the practice of paedocommunion can not be decided by mere nose counting alone during this early period of church history.²¹

Thus it is that scripture alone, is and must continue to be our standard for doctrine and life. The Church must continue to hold tenaciously to this principle. We must also be honest with the historical data. Unfortunately, some in this debate have tried to find historical allies in places where they simply do not exist. If we try and make the early church fathers say more, or even worse something different than they actually do we only open ourselves up to criticism which could have been avoided. Scripture is our rock, not church history. Let us stand firmly and faithfully on that rock and rest our arguments upon it confidently. May we who defend the biblical practice of credo-communion hold fast to these exhortations!²²

²⁰ Coppes, *Daddy*, 43. See also Berkhof's comments on the development of the supper in the patristic era. Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines*, (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, repr. 2015), 252.

²¹ It should be noted that it is the latest witness of the three that favors paedocommunion. If we were to have limited our discussion to the first two hundred years the evidence for paedocommunion would be totally lacking. Here it can perhaps also be noted that other voices from church history speak against paedocommunion. For some of these other voices see Joel Beeke, "Only for His Believers': Paedocommunion and the Witness of the Reformed Liturgies," in *Children and the Lord's Supper*, ed. Guy Waters and Ligon Duncan (Geanies House: Christian Focus, 2011), 163-179.

²² To be clear, the author of this paper does hold to the practice of credo-communion.

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