

MWP Candidates and Credentials Committee

Paedocommunion: That Was Then, This Is Now

Christopher Curtis Schrock

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how paedocommunion (also called “covenant communion”) is contrary to the word of God and the Westminster Standards. The primary attention of this paper will be the scriptural teaching on admittance to the Lord’s Supper, and the commensurate sacramental knowledge summarized in the Westminster Standards. After consulting the passages relevant to the topic of admission to the Lord’s Supper, it will be self-evident paedocommunion is contrary to the word of God. To begin, however, I think it would be helpful to discuss my theological-ecclesiastical background leading up to my recent rejection of paedocommunion.

Paedocommunion Background

I was raised in a Christian household and attended a congregation in the United Methodist Church (UMC) from birth until shortly after college graduation. My senior year of college I was introduced to Reformed theology by a minister in the Communion of Reformed Evangelical Churches (CREC), and at the time the CREC’s promotion and widespread practice of paedocommunion didn’t seem inconsistent to me because open communion, including paedocommunion, were acceptable and familiar sacramental practices in my UMC upbringing. In 2006, I distinctly remember being asked what I thought about paedocommunion by one of the men at the CREC congregation where my wife and I recently joined membership, to which I candidly replied that based on my personal experience it seemed normal to me. Around 2009 I began to experience the internal call to ministry, and then from 2010-2013 I completed ministerial training within the CREC. Paedocommunion was discussed during my pastoral coursework. I don’t recall the exegetical basis, but my memory is that paedocommunion was asserted to be more consistent with covenant theology and the practice of infant baptism,

therefore, the historic Reformed practice of public profession of faith before admission to the Lord's Supper was unnecessary. In hindsight, I realize the historic confessional Reformed interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11, and respective piety manifested in various Reformed catechisms and subsequent denominational directories of worship, were never examined, or meaningfully interacted with. This fault was predominantly my own, for I should have been more like the Bereans, examining the scriptures to see whether these things were so (Acts 17:11).

In 2013, I accepted a call to the pastorate at a CREC congregation in Billings, Montana, where I served until September 2021. The congregation had particularized in 2011 and subscribed to the original Westminster Confession of Faith, with a few exceptions. The church's Constitution stated, "Any baptized child is invited to partake of the Lord's Supper,"¹ but that practice wasn't one of the listed exceptions to the WCF.² None of this at the time seemed odd to me. By 2016 I realized my need for continuing ministerial education,³ and 2017-2019 I took a handful of online courses from Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary (PRTS). I was remarkably blessed by those courses. They sharpened the tools for pastoral ministry and prompted growth in personal piety. Around that time, I also incorporated a "Calendar of Readings in the Westminster Standards"⁴ with my daily prayers and Scripture readings, a personal devotional practice I continue to do, which I now recognize as one of the means the Spirit used to patiently prod me to reject paedocommunion. During this timeframe my initial

¹ Constitution of Christ Covenant Reformed Church (<https://ccrchurch.org/constitution>, accessed 1/1/2024).

² WCF Exceptions of Christ Covenant Reformed Church (<https://ccrchurch.org/about-us/confessions>, accessed 1/1/2024).

³ Prompted by reading Ryan M. McGraw's "Continuing Education for Ministers: A Guide for Ministers and Congregations" (*Puritan Reformed Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 1 [2012]: 307-322).

⁴ See "Calendar of Readings in the Westminster Standards" organized by Dr. Joseph Pipa Jr. (<https://gpts.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Calendar-Readings-in-WCFNumbered-1.pdf>, accessed 1/1/2024).

unease with paedocommunion was birthed, but the ordinary demands of ministry kept the concern on the backburner. I did voice my initial concern with paedocommunion to our local session, sharing with them that for the sake of conscience if we were going to practice paedocommunion we should at the very least implement formal catechism classes for our youth. The session was supportive of starting catechism classes, which we did implement. Then in 2020-2021 our session sought to work through COVID-related issues that faced our country and church, but our session was divided, and I had a minority position in both our local presbytery and the denomination, so considering God's providential dealings, I resigned for personal reasons.

After my resignation, I wasn't comfortable attending our CREC congregation, so our family started attending a local PCA congregation in the interim while I explored the next season of ministry. After meeting with the Pastor and explaining my situation, i.e., a CREC minister without a call and our membership had to stay in a CREC congregation to maintain my ordination credentials, our four oldest children were admitted to the table, and since that time a fifth child has also been admitted.⁵ My wife and I have been able to serve in the nursery, and I have also been able to help serve through filling the pulpit on occasion, as well as assist with teaching the Wednesday night kids class. During 2022-2023, I continued to study the issue of paedocommunion and became convinced that it was contrary to the word of God and the Westminster Standards. In 2023, after study and conviction I privately repented to our merciful Lord for my participation in paedocommunion practices. It is impossible to please God without faith (Hebrews 11:6), practices should follow Scriptural belief (Titus 3:8), and whatever does not

⁵ My wife and I have been blessed with six children.

proceed from faith is sin (Romans 14:23). In hindsight, when I became uneasy with paedocommunion I believe I should have refrained from active participation in it, but I take comfort in God's promises of forgiveness (1 John 1:9).

Sacramental Actions and Words

What is the scriptural teaching on admittance to the Lord's Supper? To begin, we need to examine the four descriptions of the sacramental actions and words of Jesus at the Last Supper: Matthew 26:26-30; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:14-20; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26.⁶ These four passages explain how Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper in the context and circumstance of the Passover feast, and that he "interrupted the usual Passover feast at certain points with decisive words and actions."⁷

Analysis of Matthew 26:26-30; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:14-20; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26⁸

In Matthew 26:26-30, the sacramental words and actions of Jesus are twofold: first, Jesus gave bread to the disciples *and* instructed them, "Take, eat; this is my body," and, second, Jesus gave a cup *and* instructed them, "Drink from it, all of you." In Matthew 26:26-27, the sacramental nature of the respective words and actions is apparent in our Lord's use of "blessing" for the bread and "giving thanks" for the cup. In Luke 22:19 and 1 Corinthians 11:24, "thanks" is also a descriptor with reference to the bread. Matthew's twofold description is also evident in Mark 14:22-25. Luke 22:14-20, however, provides a verbose version of the descriptions contained in Matthew and Mark. Finally, in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, the twofold

⁶ John 13 only alludes to the Lord's Supper in its description of the circumstances of the Passover festival.

⁷ "Lord's Supper" by R. S. Wallace in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Volume 3, K-P*, gen. ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), 165.

⁸ Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

sacramental words and actions of Jesus are highlighted in Paul’s responsive letter to the church at Corinth, which would have been written approximately 20 years after our Lord’s institution of the Lord’s Supper. 1 Corinthians 11 solidifies the sacramental nature of the Lord’s Supper, i.e., Paul outlines the declaration of Christ’s word of institution, as well as setting apart the bread and wine for holy use.⁹ Initially instituted by Jesus, and subsequently taught by the apostles, these four descriptions of the Lord’s Supper are the *loci classici* for the respective sacramental duty God requires of man.

Duties Directly or Consequently Prescribed in Lord’s Supper Passages

To understand the administration of and admittance to the Lord’s Supper, we must consult the inspired testimony contained in the Scriptures.¹⁰ Admittance to the Lord’s Supper is implicit in Christ’s decisive words and actions of institution. Christ’s word of institution for the Lord’s Supper must be declared. The declaration of the word of institution, administration of the Lord’s Supper is the responsibility of ministers who are God’s stewards in the church (1 Corinthians 4:1; compare Titus 1:7). Declaration of the word and administration implies admittance. Who are, therefore, the directly or consequently specified recipients of the Lord’s Supper? The directives given to the original recipients teach who ought to be admitted to the Lord’s Supper. Paul directs the recipients of his original audience to “examine yourselves” (1 Corinthians 11:28)¹¹ and partake of the elements “in remembrance of [Christ]” (1 Corinthians

⁹ See explanation in Westminster Confession of Faith 29.3.

¹⁰ “We are bound to do nothing in practice but what is required in the Scriptures; because the laws and commandments of God, revealed therein, are so exceeding broad and extensive, reaching the thoughts and intents of the heart, as well as the actions of the life, that it is not lawful for us to do any thing but what is either directly or consequently prescribed therein” (Alexander Smith Paterson, *A Concise System of Theology on the Basis of the Shorter Catechism* [London: T. Nelson and Sons, 1881], 27).

¹¹ “δοκιμαζέτω δὲ ἄνθρωπος ἑαυτὸν” (1 Cor. 11:28a) more woodenly translated: “a person should examine

11:24-25). The twofold “Do this in remembrance” and “Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me” and the correlative directive to “examine yourselves” are organically linked and derivative of Christ’s twofold sacramental words and actions in Matthew 26:26-30, Mark 14:22-25, and Luke 22:14-20. For Paul to give the directive “examine yourselves” it must have been consequently specified in Christ’s sacramental words and actions to “Take, eat; this is my body” and “Drink from it, all of you.” As one contemporary author has explained, “According to the historic interpretation of these instructions, participation in the sacrament requires the kind of faith that is capable of remembering and proclaiming Christ’s death.”¹² The Westminster Standards exemplify this historic interpretation, e.g., “the Lord’s Supper is to be administered . . . only to such as are of years and ability to examine themselves.”¹³ The scriptural teaching on admittance to the Lord’s Supper, therefore, requires recipients to “examine” themselves and partake of the elements “in remembrance” of Christ. Only those capable of receiving the Lord’s Supper in a biblically faithful way should be admitted to the Lord’s Supper.¹⁴

What is the nature and purpose of the Lord’s Supper? Sacraments seal the promises of the Gospel and confirm faith. Westminster Confession of Faith 27:1 explains:

Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, immediately instituted by God, to represent Christ and His benefits; and to confirm our interest in Him; as also, to put a visible difference between those that belong unto the Church, and the rest of the world; and solemnly to engage them to the service of God in Christ, according to His Word.

himself.” Regarding self-examination, see also 2 Corinthians 13:5.

¹² Cornelis P. Venema, *Children at the Lord’s Table? Assessing the Case for Paedocommunion* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2009), 103.

¹³ WLC Q. 177. See also WLC Questions 170-175 and WCF 29.7 & 8.

¹⁴ “[An] infant cannot examine himself or herself or discern the mysteries of Christ and His church. Therefore, that infant is categorically unable to receive the Lord’s Supper in a biblically faithful way” (Stephen G. Myers, *God To Us: Covenant Theology in Scripture* [Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2021], 413).

A sacrament cannot be used well unless it comports with its intended goal. What is the intended goal of baptism? It has historically been understood as a sacrament of initiation. What is the intended goal of the Lord's Supper? It has historically been understood as a sacrament of nourishing. Nourishing for whom? According to 1 Corinthians 11:28, it is for those capable of examining themselves, i.e., remembering and proclaiming the Lord's death. Paul warned the original audience that some of them were not using the sacrament according to the rule of Holy Scripture for its administration. Since they were not using the sacrament well, Paul told them, "For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died" (1 Corinthians 11:30). Right worship is prescribed in Holy Scripture, which includes the worthy receiving of Lord's Supper.¹⁵

Overseen and Administered by Elders

But who is responsible for overseeing worthy recipients of and admission to the Lord's Supper? Jesus has revealed his desire to rule men through men, i.e., elders. The elders of the church have been called by God and entrusted as stewards of the mysteries of Christ (Hebrews 5:4; 1 Corinthians 4:1), and they are the ones responsible to oversee that all things done in the church are done so decently and in order (1 Corinthians 14:40). Therefore, it is the duty of elders to oversee the admission to and observance of the Lord's Supper.¹⁶ If a person is examined by the elders and has a credible profession of faith, then they are granted "communicant" status, and

¹⁵ See WCF 21, particularly WCF 21:5.

¹⁶ See WCF 25.3 & 27.4. Although not part of the Westminster Standards, the "Terms of Admission to the Lord's Supper" presented to the Parliament by the Westminster divines on April 1 and 17 in 1647, exemplifies the historic interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11, and concludes: "Resolved, etc. that the examination and judgment of such persons as shall, for their ignorance of the aforesaid points of religion as have been voted by this committee not to be admitted to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, is to be in the power of the eldership of every congregation" (*Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation* compiled by James T. Dennison Jr. [Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014]). See also "1 April 1645" (pages 95-96) and "17 April 1645" (pages 113-115) in *House of Commons Journal Volume 4, 1644-1646* (<https://www.british-history.ac.uk/commons-jrnl/vol4>, accessed 1/1/2024).

are subsequently invited during the administration of the Lord's Supper to examine themselves and take-and-eat and take-and-drink in remembrance of Christ. In contrast, paedocommunion advocates do not believe admission to the Lord's Supper consequently requires remembering and proclaiming Christ's death.¹⁷ Advocates of paedocommunion disagree with the interpretation exemplified in the Westminster Standards, e.g., one advocate contends, "Nothing more than the rite of water baptism is required for access to the Lord's table."¹⁸ If baptism is the only criteria for access to the Table, then the authority of elders is necessarily diminished. Consequently, in this vacuum the agency of parents virtually becomes the determinative factor of a covenant child's access to the Lord's Supper.¹⁹ Parents are not officers in Christ's church, and for their

¹⁷ Paedocommunion advocates and respective arguments are not monolithic, e.g., compare the following: Tim Gallant, *Feed My Lambs: Why the Lord's Table Should be Restored to Covenant Children* (Grande Prairie: Pactum Reformanda Publishing, 2002); Rich Lusk, *Paedofaith: A Primer on the Mystery of Infant Salvation and a Handbook for Covenant Parents* (Monroe: Athanasius Press, 2005); "Presuppositions of Paedocommunion" by Ray R. Sutton in *The Geneva Papers*, Special Edition (1982, Geneva Divinity School) (https://www.garynorth.com/freebooks/docs/a_pdfs/newslet/geneva/82s2.pdf, accessed 1/1/2024); "Theses on Paedocommunion" by James B. Jordan in *The Geneva Papers*, Special Edition (1982, Geneva Divinity School) (https://www.garynorth.com/freebooks/docs/a_pdfs/newslet/geneva/82s1.pdf, accessed 1/1/2024); James Peirce, *An Essay in Favor of the Ancient Practice of Giving the Eucharist to Children* (London: J. Noon, 1728); Peter J. Leithart, *Daddy, why was I excommunicated?: An Examination of Leonard J. Coppes' Daddy, May I Take Communion?* (Niceville: Transfiguration Press, 1992); *Is the Lord's Supper for Children?* by Christian L. Keidel in *Westminster Theological Journal* (1975), 37/3: 301-341. Cornelis P. Venema summarizes and refutes the four principal arguments for paedocommunion in *Children at the Lord's Table?* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Press, 2009). See also Guy Prentiss Waters' critique of underlying hermeneutic of paedocommunion argumentation by Peter Leithart, Steve Wilkins, and Mark Horne (*The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology: A Comparative Analysis* [Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2006], 284-292). See also "The True History of Paedocommunion" by Matthew Winzer in *The Confessional Presbyterian* 3 (2007) (<https://www.cpjournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/Winzer-HistoryPaedocommunion.pdf>, accessed 1/1/2024).

¹⁸ Peter J. Leithart, "A Response to '1 Corinthians 11:17-34: The Lord's Supper'" in *The Auburn Avenue Theology: Pros and Cons: Debating the Federal Vision: The Knox Theological Seminary Colloquium on the Federal Vision*, edited by E. Calvin Beisner [Fort Lauderdale: Knox Theological Seminary, 2004], 298 (quoted in Guy Prentiss Waters, *The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology: A Comparative Analysis* [Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2006], 289).

¹⁹ A helpful exercise is to conduct a comparative analysis of the respective Constitutions of Reformed churches that practice, promote, or tolerate paedocommunion. The tensions and contradictions between elders being responsible for oversight and administration of the Table but parents being the determinative factor in a child's access to the Table are apparent, e.g., from the "Constitution - Form of Government and Book of Confessions" of Trinity Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama (CREC): "TPC practices a discriminating form of "open communion." That is, we encourage all baptized Christians (in good standing, not excommunicated) to celebrate the feast of the Eucharist and so commune with Christ in His body. Visiting Christians should abide by the policies of

individual convictions or sensibilities to determine sacramental practices in the church is contrary to the word of God and the Westminster Standards.

Conclusion

The Scriptures discussed above teach that there are duties directly and consequently specified for admittance to the Lord's Supper. The scriptural teaching on admittance to the Lord's Supper requires recipients "examine" themselves and partake of the elements "in remembrance" of Christ. In summary, the Lord's Supper "consists of the mystical actions and words of Christ, and of the obedience of the disciples and believers that answers to them, and also in the subsequent giving of thanks."²⁰ A paedocommunion advocate will probably write off this short paper as just another non-paedocommunion example in a myriad of examples that they

their home Church with regard to participation. In principle, we confess that the Eucharistic table belongs to all of God's people, and invite all other Christians to join with us in feasting and celebrating the Lord's presence and gifts in and through bread and wine. Under the headship of Christ, the responsibility for administering the Sacraments remains with the session. Baptized children are welcome to partake as soon as they are physically able, if their parents desire. However, for those who differ with this view, the session shall defer to the conviction of the head of each household. See APPENDIX #1 for TPC's policy regarding the admission of children to the Lord's Supper." From Appendix 1: "We recognize that both paedocommunionists and credocommunionists are concerned to be faithful to Scripture and to the church's historic practice (with paedocommunionists pointing to the early centuries of the church, and credocommunionists pointing to the Reformational era). While individual officers are free to take a humble, conscientious stance on the issue as they see fit, as a session, we are neutral and inclusive, allowing both practices, as families desire. Parents are free to choose according to their own conscience and understanding whether or not they would like to bring their child to the table on the basis of baptism (as soon as the child can ingest the bread and wine), or on the basis of a profession of faith (evaluated in an age appropriate way by the elders, when the parents request an interview). Parents may simply notify elders of their convictions at the time of their child's baptism, or when they join the church, and the session will make a note of it. Elders will be happy to serve as advisors if parents wish to have additional pastoral input in making a decision about bringing their child to the table" (<https://www.trinity-pres.net/documents/TPCConstitutionRevised2015.pdf>, accessed 1/1/2024); an additional example from the "Constitution" of Christ Church, Moscow, ID (CREC): "Communicant Members: Under the headship of Christ, the responsibility for administering the sacraments remain with the elders, who nevertheless respect the pastoral responsibilities of parents. Children in households who have not been baptized are recognized by the elders to be non-communicant members of member households. Children in households who have been baptized and have come to the Lord's Table are communicant members of the church. Any baptized child may partake of the Lord's Table, provided the parents instruct the child at each observation of the Supper, and the child can heed the instruction" (<https://www.christkirk.com/our-church/our-constitution-2/>, accessed 1/1/2024).

²⁰ *Synopsis of a Purer Theology, Volume 2, Disputations 32-52*, edited by William den Boer and Riemer A. Faber (Landrum: Davenant Press, 2023), 583.

find to be underwhelming, i.e., an “appeal that is so self-evident that it barely requires argument.”²¹ But I am okay with that. There is a saying: *What you win people with is what you win them to*. In 2006, when I initially joined the CREC, the thing that appealed to me were the standard tenets of Reformed theology, e.g., the glory and sovereignty of God, the glory of the Cross, sincerity in worship, etc.,. Some folks are initially attracted to the CREC because of paedocommunion, but that wasn’t my experience. It is embarrassing to admit that even as a minister I was never “convinced” of paedocommunion but was largely just going along with what was seemingly normative and shared continuity with aspects of my non-Reformed theological and ecclesiastical upbringing. Just another instance that proves the maxim *Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi* (the law of prayer/worship is the law of belief). Once I found myself worshipping in a circumstance where the right worship of God, with respect to the Lord’s Supper, was practiced, the belief followed in short order. During pastoral ministry, I’ve encouraged and reminded folks on multiple occasions that the Spirit’s work of sanctification is a gradual work. And now, regarding paedocommunion, I have another anecdote and personal example of the Spirit’s gradual work of sanctification.

²¹ Tim Gallant, *Feed My Lambs*, 74.

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