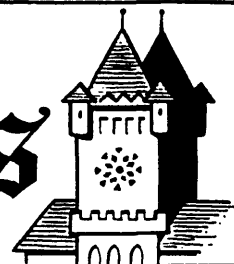


The Geneva Papers



SPECIAL EDITION

©1982, Geneva Divinity School

25¢

THESES ON PAEDOCOMMUNION

by James B. Jordan

This paper has circulated previously, in cruder forms. The reason I have set these out as theses is to elicit response. Based on responses, friendly and unfriendly to the theses, I continue to upgrade the argumentation. This June 1982 edition, thus, supersedes all others. *The reader should continue to regard these as debatable points, not as a formally published essay.*

1. Infants and small children participated in the Lord's Supper in the Western Church until the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, according to Walker, *History of the Christian Church* (NT: Scribners, 1919), p. 274; Joseph Bingham, *Antiquities of the Christian Church* (Book XV, Chap. IV, § 7); and cf. Christian L. Keidel, "Is the Lord's Supper for Children?" in *Westminster Theological Journal*, Spring 1975, and R. J. Rushdoony, *Institutes of Biblical Law*, p. 752f., 849. (I believe Rushdoony misinterprets the evidence he cites to indicate that Calvin adopted paedocommunion at the end of his life.) At any rate, these sources indicate paedocommunion to have been the teaching of the early church.

2. With the growth of a superstitious view of the sacrament, people feared to spill so much as a single drop of the transubstantiated blood of Christ. Thus, the laity during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (in the West) began to deny themselves the cup, in the belief that the blood is also contained in the body (bread). Because infants and children might lose a crumb or spill a drop, they also were excommunicated during this dark period of the church's history. Cf. Walker, p. 274; and Keidel.

3. The Hussites argued for infant communion. Cf. Keidel.
4. Several of the Reformers worked to reinstitute paedocommunion, including Wolfgang Musculus and Jeremy Taylor. Cf. Keidel.

5. The Biblical evidence that children are included in the covenant, and in all the privileges thereof, is overwhelming. Baptist theologians isolate a few "repent and be baptized" passages, lifting them out of context (they are addressed to adults), and apply them to exclude children from baptism. Using identical logic, presbyterian writers have lifted the self-examination and discernment stipulations out of I Cor. 11, where they apply to gross sin on the part of adults, and have used them to exclude children (and, whenever consistent, the feeble-minded and the senile) from the Lord's Table. We shall deal with I Cor. 11 more fully later on, but the gist of our argument is that this passage does not deal with the question of the inclusion of children, and only by lifting the stipulations out of context can it be made to do so; and moreover that the Bible repeatedly shows children participating in the Lord's Supper, so that I Cor. 11 cannot be used against paedocommunion without setting up a contradiction in Scripture.

6. Turning to Biblical evidence, the entire assumption of the Old Testament is that the whole family participated in the Passover. On the night of the first Passover, there would have been nothing else to eat. It is gratuitous to assume that children were excluded from this or subsequent Passovers.

7. There is no Biblical foundation for the Jewish ritual of having the youngest male child ask what the Passover means as part of the ritual. Exodus 12:26-27 does not have a ritual in mind, but rather the conversational teaching in the whole of life which a father is to provide for his children. On the other hand, obviously there is nothing wrong with catechizing

children. The question is this: is the catechism to lead up to the joining of the church, or is the catechizing process employed because the child is already a member of the church?

8. Scripture indicates that infants and children under the Old Covenant ate at the Lord's Table. This is found in I Cor. 10:1-5 and John 6:31-65. In these passages, both Paul and Jesus teach that the manna and the water provided for Israel during the wilderness were true Spiritual food, and the same food as the Lord's Supper. The Spirit came to be with the manna and water in the wilderness, with the Passover meal, with other Old Covenant meals, and He comes to be with the Lord's Supper today.

The children ate the manna and drank the water, for there was nothing else to eat and drink. I Cor. 10:1-5 associates this with baptism: all those baptized in the Old Covenant were entitled to eat at the Lord's Supper. This does not mean that all were ultimately saved, for "with most of them God was not well pleased; for they were laid low in the wilderness."

9. When the disciples tried to keep infants (brephee) from Christ (Matt. 19:13-15 and parallel passages), He rebuked them. A nominalist hermeneutic, which separates things that ought not to be separated, only distinguished, will say, "Yes, infants may be brought to Christ to be dedicated, but not to be baptized into the Church." The Reformed must argue, "No, for you divide Christ. To be in Christ is to be regarded as part of His mystical body (the Church), and to be eligible for His sacramental body (the Eucharist)." Unfortunately, the same nominalism that informs the Baptist argument also seems to inform that of the Reformed. The Reformed say, "Infants may be brought to Christ, but not be brought to Christ (Eucharistically). Infants are in the Church, but are not in the Church. This continues until. . . ." Until what? The Bible never says.

10. THERE IS NO PLACE IN SCRIPTURE WHERE WE SEE COVENANT CHILDREN GOING THROUGH SOME RITE WHICH MAKES THEM ELIGIBLE FOR THE EUCHARIST, either in the Old or in the New Covenant. There is no foundation for Confirmation.

11. THERE IS NO PLACE IN SCRIPTURE WHERE WE SEE COVENANT CHILDREN BEING CATECHIZED WITH A VIEW TO MAKING THEM ELIGIBLE FOR THE EUCHARIST. Catechetical instruction always follows after admission to the covenant.

12. THERE IS NO PLACE IN SCRIPTURE WHERE WE SEE COVENANT CHILDREN GOING THROUGH SOME EXPERIENCE, MAKING SOME DECISION, OR GOING BEFORE ELDERS TO MAKE SOME DECLARATION, IN ORDER TO MAKE THEM ELIGIBLE FOR THE EUCHARIST. Nor does Scripture anywhere teach any such thing.

13. In Reformed theology, the sacraments are visible Words. They are the Word of God come to man. They include a dictated response, just as when God made covenant with Israel, He dictated to them what they were to do in response. In Anabaptist theology, the sacraments are not the Word of God, but only the response of man. Men make profession in baptism, but baptism is not the preaching of the gospel. In Anabaptist theology, man comes to God in the sacraments; in Reformed theology, God comes to man in the sacraments, and man responds. Baptism and Eucharist preach the gospel to the infant, and call on him to respond. As he grows, he will respond, one way or another. The Word, however, is always prevalent.

In Reformed history, unfortunately, the Eucharist seems to have become baptistic. Many Calvinistic pastors do not

know why they baptize, and baptism has also become baptistic. For instance, in presbyterian circles, baptism is frequently only a dedication. In Reformed circles, baptism is often based on a presumption that the child is already in the covenant, already elect, already regenerate, or already something-or-other. Thus, baptism is either a parental response (presbyterian) or an infant's response (Dutch Reformed). In Calvin and Augustine, however, it is because the infant is damned that he must be baptized, and the baptism is the application of the gospel to him. Whether the child is elect or regenerate is God's concern, not ours. We are, however, told to regard the child, after its cleansing in baptism, as a member of the covenant, to count him a Christian and to treat him as a Christian, until possibly he is excommunicated.

It makes no sense at all to turn around and tell the child that he must attain to something, and rejoin the church, in order to receive Christ in the Eucharist. In fact, such a theology invariably leads to a view that Christ is not really present at the Eucharist; rather the Eucharist is seen as man's memorial, man's response, not God's visible Word with the Present Christ coming to man. Rather, let us tell our children that Christ comes to them every week in the Eucharist, and they are to receive Him. No small child has any trouble with this. They naturally keep their parents' faith.

14. We may follow up on this by noting the two trees in the Garden. By prohibiting only the Tree of Knowledge, God told Adam to take Life first, and then build Knowledge and Ethics on Life, and in terms of Life (faith). Life, faith, the Word, the Word visible and eaten — these were prevenient to knowledge and ethics.

Satan, however, reversed God's command. He told man to take of Knowledge and Ethics first, and then get Life. Man was to attain to Life, rather than take Life as a presupposition. Life was to be earned through merit, not taken as a prevenient Word from God.

Any system of apologetics which insists that men must use knowledge and ethics to demonstrate the truth of faith may be seen as ultimately Satanic. Obviously, not by intent, but by effect all the same. Van Til has shown this repeatedly. Faith — life — must be taken as presuppositional. Knowledge and ethics grow out of faith, not vice versa.

Is it not also the case, then, that any theological system which tells people that they must learn a catechism, or any other body of doctrine, before coming to the Tree of Life, may be seen as ultimately Satanic? Obviously, the entire Reformed tradition has not intended to be Satanic, but has the effect been Satanic? Faith and the sacraments have moved from being presuppositions to being attainments.

We may observe at this point that the disorders in Corinth were such as to call into question faith itself, not works. The discernment spoken of in I Cor. 11 is that of "the body" (not the Lord's body; 'Lord's' is in italics, and not in any Greek manuscript). In other words, because Christ is identified with the body mystical as well as with the body sacramental, schism in the Church is quintessentially a sin of faithlessness. Jesus said the same thing when he said to leave your gift at the altar and get things right with your brother before communing (Mt. 5:23f.). The whole context of I Cor., including Ch. 11, concerns the sin of schism. Nominalism has overlooked the real sin here, and individuated self-examination. Those who are most schismatic often have the most individualistic view of this passage. The point of I Cor. 11 is that we dare not approach the body sacramental when we know that there is schism in the body mystical.

Shouldn't we hold, then, that to cut children off from Christ, from the body mystical and from the body sacramental, is one of the fullest expressions of the sin of schism? So far from implying the exclusion of children, I Cor. 11 seems to demand their inclusion, lest we be cursed. Of course, God is gracious, and this point has not been seen clearly, because the presuppositional nature of faith was obscured by Aquinas after Anselm, and by Calvin's followers after Calvin's death. After Van Til, however, the Church will have to come to grips with this. Once the point has been made clearly, God will no longer overlook schism. [Indeed, it is my opinion that the infrequency of communion in protestant churches is one of the greatest manifestations of the curse of God ever visited on a culture, and entirely in keeping with what must be His attitude toward those who keep the little children from coming to Him.]

A qualification needs to be introduced at this point. God is hardly indifferent to knowledge and ethics. After all, He set up

the Tree of Knowledge and Ethics in the Garden for a purpose. The point is that knowledge and ethics are to develop from faith and life, not vice versa. Heresy and sin do indeed keep men from the Table (the Tree of Life), but heresy and sin only arise because men have first of all despised the Gift of God (the Tree of Life) in the first place. Thus, as a child grows, his horizon of knowledge and ethical responsibility is to widen. Catechetical and moral instruction is essential. The child who rebels and sins is to be suspended and/or cut off from the Tree of Life, until he repents. Thus, there is a secondary sense in which the Psalmist properly says that he approaches the throne of God with clean hands and a clean heart, and there is a proper self-purging which is to characterize the Christian life. The point is that the order is life — righteousness — more Life — more righteousness — etc. NOT: righteousness — Life.

C. L. Stam, Canadian Reformed theologian, sees this point clearly (p. 129, *Everything in Christ*). Children are to be kept from the Table, he says, but "this does not mean that the children are robbed of any benefit in Christ, for the essence of both sacraments is the same (his emphasis). . . ." If, however, the essence is the same, then there is no reason to keep children from the Table.

15. The fact that "unconverted" slaves ate the Passover in the Old Covenant proves that inward circumcision is not the ecclesiastical criterion for participation in the Lord's Supper. All purchased slaves were circumcized when they became part of the master's household, according to the express command of God (Ex. 12:44; Gen. 17:12f.). The act of circumcision made the slave into a covenant member, in the same class as the "native of the land" or Israelite (Ex. 12:48; Lev. 15:29), entitled to partake of the Passover, which no foreigner could partake of (Ex. 12:43-45).

A newly-purchased slave would not even know the Hebrew tongue, let alone be able to profess faith or be inwardly converted. It would take time to teach him Hebrew, and then to explain the covenant of God to him. Notice, then, that the slave was circumcised in ignorance and admitted to the Lord's Table in ignorance. The fact that an ignorant slave was graciously invited to the Lord's Table in the Old Covenant shows that (ignorant) infants were also invited, and that (ignorant) baptized persons belong at the Lord's Table today. (Gal. 4:1 identifies the slave and the child.)

16. Another related question, one which bears presuppositionally on the general paedocommunion issue, is whether pregnant women should be suspended from the Lord's Table. We do not have a magical view of the sacrament, so the natural response is, "No, for the child only gets physical nourishment from bread and wine, so the question is ecclesiastically meaningless." This, however, seems to contradict the testimony of Judges 13:7, 14. When the angel of YHWH appeared to the wife of Manoah and told her that her son would be a Nazirite from his earliest days, He told her not to eat or drink anything that a Nazirite should not eat or drink. Now, the reason the Nazirite was forbidden to drink wine and eat raisins was not because of any physical influence associated with them, but for sacramental or ecclesiastical reasons. During the course of his work the Nazirite was not to participate in the good fruits and blessings of the LORD. This is a type of Jesus Christ, who took upon Himself the curse of the covenant during His life that we might experience the blessings of the wine of the covenant during our lives.

The fact that the mother of a Nazirite was to abstain from the fruit of the vine means that the Spiritual-symbolic character of food pertains to the child as much as to the mother. The child was to be counted as and treated as an Israelite and as a Nazirite, even before birth. Yet, when the child is born, he is born outside the covenant, and his birth defiles his mother (Lev. 12), and that defilement is only removed when he is reborn through circumcision (Lev. 12:3).

We are left, at this point at least, in a quandary. If Samson's case is normative, then we must say that children are counted as members of Christ's body as long as they are inside their mother's bodies, and thus that they are to be counted as participants in the Eucharist. At birth they are excommunicated, for at birth they leave their mothers' bodies, and also leave Christ's body. Until such time as they are baptized, they are outside Christ. On the other hand, if Samson is an exception, then we might hold that the child in the womb is outside of Christ, and that the sacrament is meaningless to him.

17. It is often argued that infants cannot exercise discerning faith. While the history of John the Baptist (Luke 1:44) disproves this notion, we may grant it for the sake of argument. We need, however, to distinguish between those to whom we are told to give the Word, and those who personally choose to respond to it. We may have suspicions about certain persons in the church, but as long as they are in the church we are to count them and treat them as Christians. Similarly, we may have doubts about the ability of children to hear the preached Word and to discern the visible Word, but Scripture tells us to count and treat them as Christians, and to set the Word before them as for them. Those who are given the sacrament are told to receive it in faith, but God has not told us to give the sacrament only to those who can prove that they have faith. The circle of those to whom the sacrament is to be given is defined by Scripture, and it is broader than those who can give a verbal profession of faith before the elders; it includes children.

As children grow, they will gradually exercise more and more discerning faith. The point, as always, is that the Word is prevenient. God sovereignly comes to man, not man to God.

Faith is manifest in works. The child has one law, and one only: obey your parents. His obedience to God, his faith, is measurable in terms of this. As he grows older, his horizon will broaden. "Discerning the body" for the child may be translated as "obey your parents." Self-examination for the child is administered through the rod and repentance. There is nothing especially complicated about this. (Except, of course, when one set of parents criticize another set of parents for being too harsh, or too lax, or too something-or-other. One of the greatest problems in the church is the inability of people to leave each other alone.)

18. Historically, the movement known as rationalistic nominalism preceded the Reformation and influenced it. Luther claimed to be of Occam's school, and Zwingli was heavily influenced by this humanism. For this reason, individualistic Baptist teachings sprang up under Zwingli, and have plagued the Reformation churches ever since. Calvin was the least nominalistic and most consistently Trinitarian of the Reformers. With the advent of Vantillian presuppositionalism, it is time to purge out the old leaven of nominalism and individualism from our Reformed churches.

On the basis of Acts 2:38, "repent and be baptized," and Mark 16:16, "he who believes and is baptized," the Baptists have argued that infants cannot be baptized, since they cannot understand enough to believe. Similarly, the Reformed have argued on the basis of I Cor. 11:28, 29 that infants cannot practice discernment and self-examination, and so must not be admitted to the Lord's Table. These two lines of reasoning stand or fall together. We have seen that the Bible teaches paedocommunion, just as it teaches paedobaptism; therefore, such passages as these refer to adults. It was the adults who were abusing the Table at Corinth, and it is to adults that Paul addresses his admonitions. As children grow up, they will more and more exercise the faith and repentance signified by their baptism in infancy, and they will more and more exercise discernment and self-examination as they participate in the Lord's Supper.

19. Another sad influence on the Reformed faith is the "primacy of the intellect." The doctrine of the "primacy of the intellect" is a Greek notion, which crept into the Reformed community early on, due to the influence of Greek ideas during the period of the Reformation. The primacy of the intellect leads to the primacy of preaching, to the primacy of the preacher, and to the whole three-office view.

Over against the primacy of the intellect, the Scriptures teach the primacy of the Word. The Word has primacy in *all* its forms, not only as read and taught, but also as *sung* (Psalms, Bible songs, and psalm-like hymns), as *obeyed* and *lived* in community ("body life"), and as made *visible* and eaten (the Lord's Supper and Baptism). Under the influence of sound presuppositional thinking, and simply because of the need to develop community in the churches, many churches are returning to the primacy of the Word, and balancing the preaching with the singing of the Bible, with the development of community, and with weekly communion.

The error of the primacy of the intellect has messed up the interpretation of I Corinthians 11:29, which speaks of discerning the body. (The Greek does not say, "discerning the Lord's body," but only "discerning the body.") The intellec-

tualistic interpretation of this verse has it that "discerning the body" means *understanding* the proper Reformed doctrine of the Holy Eucharist. Thus, "discerning the body" means that we do not regard the bread as a new sacrifice (Roman transubstantiation), nor as a new incarnation (Lutheran consubstantiation), nor as a token of an absent Savior (Zwinglian memorialism), but as the Spiritual presence of Christ (the doctrine of the real Spiritual presence). In the context of I Corinthians this is not the meaning of the verse.

Rather, the whole discourse in I Corinthians speaks of the body not only as the sacramental body of Christ, but also as the corporate body of Christ: the church. The problem in I Corinthians is the divisions and sins in the church, which is Christ's body; and what I Corinthians 11:29 is speaking about is the failure of the people to act in unity and love as Christ's body. To "discern the body" is to recognize the brethren as Christian brethren, and treat them accordingly, with love and respect. This is abundantly clear from the context (I Cor. 10:16-17; 11:17-22, 33-34).

Thus, the problem is moral, not intellectual. To be sure, false doctrine is a moral problem, and must be dealt with; but there is nothing in this passage to justify the notion that children must not be admitted to the Lord's Table until they are "old enough to understand." The issue is not primarily intellectual, but moral. After all, how many of us "understand" the mystery of the Lord's Supper in any full way? And again, if intellectual apprehension be required, no mentally defective persons could be admitted. Such an interpretation forces us to unhappy conclusions.

20. Yet another influence on Reformed people is Baptist theology. The Baptist doctrine is that baptism symbolizes a person's individual faith and regeneration, and so that only such persons can come to the Table of the Lord. This, however, is not what baptism means in the Bible. In Scripture, baptism is God's claim of ownership and God's promise of salvation. In the sense that it is a claim, baptism creates an obligation to obey God's Word. In the sense that it is a *promise*, baptism is the gospel, and creates an obligation to exercise *faith* in God. Thus, the Reformed faith exhorts its children to improve on their baptisms (Westminster Larger Catechism 167), to mix faith with the promises. The *promise* is to you and to your children, we are told (Acts 2:39), just as it was for Abraham. The promise must be mixed with faith to be effective, for there is no automatic salvation. Baptism, however, is not man-centered, a sign of faith, but God-centered, a sign of the promise. Thus, baptism is administered first, and then faith is to follow. The Bible does not tell us to baptize indiscriminately, but to baptize households. Those who share table fellowship with the covenant head of the household are included in the household covenant, and baptized. They also belong at the Lord's Table.

It is all too often assumed, however, that baptism is a sign of the promise, but that only those who have exercised faith, to the satisfaction of some spiritual examiner, are to be admitted to the Lord's Supper. *There is not a shred of evidence in Scripture for this additional demand.* Moreover, all parents know that their children receive the faith from them without question. Have you ever met a five-year-old who rejected the faith? Not likely. Such rejection, when it occurs, happens much later on. The child does have the faith. Only on that assumption can we take seriously the commands in Deuteronomy 6:7, 20ff. So, how can we deny him the food Jesus wants to give him?

If we are going to treat our children as unregenerate until they go through some baptistic conversion experience, we can hardly teach them to pray, or even permit them to pray. Away with such hymns as "Jesus loves me, this I know for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to Him belong; they are weak, but He is strong." Do we really believe this, if our children are not even allowed to eat Jesus' food? But this is not true to the genius of the Reformed faith. Rather, we know that God says "the child is Mine." Thus, we teach our children that Jesus is their Saviour. We teach them to pray, and we teach them the laws and precepts of the kingdom. Baptism is God's seal of covenant membership, and entitles the child to all the benefits of the covenant. If the child later on rejects the covenant, he is to be excommunicated; and this presupposes that he is already a communicate member.

21. The Lord's Supper is not some great ethereal event. It is as simple as a dinner with Jesus, and is as profound as all

the mysteries of the presence of God. When the Lord's Supper once again is properly observed in the church, as a natural part of weekly worship, it will cease to be something strange, and it will be natural and unavoidable to include the children of the covenant in it. There is nothing in Scripture or in the logic of Reformed Christianity which allows us to deny the sacrament to our children; and there are many reasons why we should and must include them.

22. It is sometimes charged that persons advocating infant communion hold a superstitious view of the sacrament. We hold rather, that it is those who deny the sacrament to children who tend toward superstition. Because of the inability of Calvin to reform the Genevan churches as much as he knew they needed to be, the Reformed churches have followed the Genevan town council in holding communion infrequently, instead of at each Lord's Day service. As a result, one of the questions raised by God's people and by theological students is this: What is special about the sacraments that goes beyond the normal, weekly preaching?

The question is not of concern to the authors (Author) of the Bible, simply because it was never imagined that the Word would be set forth verbally without also being set forth visibly (sacramentally) (Acts 2:46). The disciples on the road to Emmaus heard the Word spoken, and then recognized Christ when He broke bread for them (Luke 24), all on the Lord's Day. This is the proper pattern for New Covenant worship. Were this pattern followed, with weekly communion, the question of what is "special" about the sacrament would not arise.

Once the sacrament becomes "special," however, people want to keep it "special" by having it only infrequently. *This* is the superstition of modern Protestantism. The covenant renewal meal with the Lord becomes a superstitious rite, which no one really understands. The exclusion of children is part and parcel of this error of viewing the sacrament as something "special." If we understand the sacrament as a covenant meal with the Lord, at His house, how can we exclude our children? Does Jesus invite us over to His house

for dinner, and tell us to leave the kids at home, or get a baby-sitter? By no means! Rather, He says, "Suffer the little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not." It is just because we do *not* view the sacrament superstitiously that we include our children.

23. A word concerning administration. The Church of God is organized by households, and the priest-king of the household is normally the father. It would be best if families would sit together during worship, and the elements were passed by the elders to the covenant heads of households. The father would then distribute the elements to his wife and children. If one or another child were in a condition of recalcitrance or rebellion, the father could determine not to allow the child to participate in sacramental worship. In this way proper Christian discipline is maintained, without burdening the eldership with the impossible task of examining infants and small children week by week.

Obviously, if a covenant head suspends an older child from the sacrament, and the suspended child believes that the action is wrong, appeal can be made to the court of elders. Final power to suspend and excommunicate remains with the elders.

24. Equally obviously, if a child or infant will not eat the food given him, he is not to be "force-fed." Those who charge us with "force-feeding infants" must explain how infants were fed during the wilderness wanderings, when Christ's bread from heaven and water from the rock were all there was to eat and drink. While indeed the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper is infinitely profound, yet on a fundamental level it is as simple as "dinner with Jesus." If a child won't eat, then he won't eat. There is nothing superstitious about it.

25. The fact that some liberal denominations have adopted the position of child communion is no testimony to the truth or falsity of the position. Liberals do not get their theology from the Bible but from sentiment. It may be a nice, sweet idea to let little children come to the Lord's Supper, but is it Biblical? That is the question. Let us follow Scripture, and not simply react against liberals.

The Geneva Papers are published every month by Geneva Divinity School. They are mailed free of charge to those who ask to be put on the mailing list. Address: 708 Hamvassy Drive, Tyler, TX 75701. Donations are tax deductible; checks should be made out to Geneva Divinity School.