

OpenTheo

Q&A#45 Paedocommunion?

September 11, 2018



Alastair Roberts

Today's question: "Do you hold to paedocommunion? If so, how would you reconcile this with Paul's warning in 1 Cor 11:29, and that chapter more generally?"

If you have any questions, you can leave them on my Curious Cat account:
<https://curiouscat.me/zugzwanged>.

If you have enjoyed these videos, please tell your friends and consider supporting me on Patreon: <https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>.

My new Soundcloud account is here: <https://soundcloud.com/alastairadversaria>. You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes:
<https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, do you hold to paedocommunion? If so, how would you reconcile this with Paul's warning in 1 Corinthians 11 29 and that chapter more generally? I'll read 1 Corinthians 11 17-34 as it's such important background for what I'll be saying. Now in giving these instructions, I do not praise you, since you come together not for the better, but for the worse.

For first of all, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you, and in part I believe it. For there must also be factions among you that those who are approved may be recognized among you. Therefore, when you come together in one place, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper.

For in eating, each one takes his own supper ahead of others, and one is hungry and another is drunk. What? Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you in this? I do not praise you. For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the same night in which he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, Take eat.

This is my body, which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me. In the same manner he also took the cup after supper, saying, This cup is the new covenant in my blood.

This do as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till he comes. Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord.

But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread and drink of that cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep.

For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord that we may not be condemned with the world. Therefore, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another.

But if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, lest you come together for judgment. And the rest I will set in order when I come. I think the background of this chapter is particularly important for considering what Paul is addressing within his warnings later on.

The background is that of the practice of the Corinthian church that so violates the core meaning of the supper that it virtually nullifies its meaning altogether. So when they're gathering together, it is not to celebrate the Lord's supper because of the way they are eating. The very supper character of it, the very relationship of the supper with Christ's death is being undermined.

And so this is what Paul is tackling. And he's tackling a practice that is characterized by selfishness, by factions, by divisions within the church and by oppositions and people preferring themselves over others. And it's that breaking up of the body of Christ rather than representing the body as one loaf that's being shared in Christ.

This is a church that is torn apart. And those divisions are nowhere more evident than at the celebration of the supper. And so this is seen as a violation of the meaning of the supper.

And this provides the context for his challenges later on in the chapter. We're used to reading just that small section of this chapter where it talks about the institution of the supper. And we often take it outside of its immediate context.

It's why its context within that chapter is one of rebuke and warning. It's not just a flat presentation of the meaning of the supper. Rather, this is in the context of correcting severe ill practice.

This is a violation of the supper that Paul is trying to rectify. And so he's drawing attention back to the true meaning of the supper. Now what he focuses upon is not this is the true meaning of this sign.

That this sign is supposed to be subjectively reflected upon. And as you reflect upon this meaning, this will show you what the supper is truly about. I think this is a lot to do with our first of all, we've individualised the meaning of the supper and we've subjectivised and privatised it.

Whereas the meaning of the supper is very much more of an objective thing. To remember the Lord's death is the way that we think about it. But yet the emphasis here, I think, is not on a subjective remembering, but a public memorialising that we memorialise, we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

This is a public event that shows forth Christ's death until he comes. And Christ's death, not just as a past event that we ruminate over and that's very much associated with focusing upon our individual sinfulness and that that led to Christ's suffering on the cross. But proclaiming Christ's death is that which won the victory.

And this meal is that which manifests the fruit of that victory and proclaims that victory to the principalities and powers. And to God himself, drawing this act of memorial as something that is Godward focused, that just as you have the memorial sacrifices, this is a memorial celebration that calls upon God to act in light of what he has done in Christ. So it memorialises Christ's death, declaring that to the principalities and powers and also calling God to act on the basis of what he has done in his son.

There is also, of course, a more communal and subjective remembrance of what Christ has done for us. So all these elements of remembrance, memorial and publicisation of the fact of Christ's death are involved. But yet this is focused very much upon a communal act.

We tend to talk a lot about the elements, the bread and the wine, and that that is the meaning that we reflect upon that meaning or that we ingest some meaning. Whereas what the focus is upon within this passage is not so much upon the elements taken in and of themselves, but of the elements given, distributed, instituted by Christ, blessed by Christ, given to us and shared among us. That is where the meaning is found in the celebration of a meal, not in elements just standing there in front of us on a table to be meditated upon.

And so for many within the church, this has become a focus of meditation, of reflection. And that is not inappropriate. There is a place for meditation and reflection, but that's not the main point of the supper.

The main point is not to meditate and ruminate and reflect upon this until I come. It's to

do this, it's to celebrate this action. And it's that public factor that is a communal factor that is crucial to the meaning of the supper.

What Paul draws attention to here, what is violating the meaning of the supper, is not some people failing to get the metaphysics of what's taking place. What he draws attention to is the division and the sectarianism within the church, the privileging of certain parties over others, certain parties putting themselves ahead of others. And the sort of table manners that you have emphasised within a gospel such as Luke, Paul is drawing attention to a perverse table practice here.

And the table is not just about the elements upon it. It's not primarily about that. It's about the shared meal.

And where that meal is not being shared, where people are choosing the place of honour over others, where people are not inviting the poor and are privileging the rich over the poor, and where certain people are going away hungry and others are going away overly fed and drunk even, there's something seriously wrong. It's a violation of this proclamation of Christ's death. And so the proclamation of Christ's death is supposed to be a public event that manifests the body that has been formed out of his death and resurrection.

And so the efficacy of his death is seen in a church that is bringing people from different backgrounds together, that is overcoming the divisions within humanity, that's overcoming the divisions between humanity and God. And in these respects, if we are celebrating the supper in a way that undermines that fact, we are violating its meaning. Now, how does this relate to paedocommunion? First of all, when we think about the body of Christ, what is the body of Christ? Who is a member of the body of Christ? I believe that infants of believing Christians are included within the body of Christ.

And I think there is a prudential practice of baptism in the Lord's Supper that corresponds to this. In certain cases, it's not a matter of absolute rule that you must baptise children. There is prudence to be applied.

And in the same way, when it comes to communion, there's prudence to be applied. You need to consider is this, it's like in the case of adoption, which I think provides many helpful analogies. The meaning of adoption is not primarily retrospective or nor is it primarily thinking about what is already the case.

It's thinking about the prospective force of an action. You adopt a child in order that they will grow up in the loving relationship and life of that family. In the same way we practice, we baptise children in the anticipation that they will grow up into full participation within the life of the church.

Where there's not good reason to believe that, I do not believe that baptism should be

practised. And so a great many of the infant baptisms that practise, for instance, within the Church of England end up undermining the meaning of baptism. It's like adopting children and then leaving them out on the street because they're not actually participating within the full life of the church.

They've had the sign, but that sign's been emptied of its proper meaning. And its proper meaning is that they should participate in the full life of the church. It's not an ambiguous thing or an ambivalent thing.

It's not that you have this sign and you may or may not. Rather, the point of the sign is that you will participate within the full life of the church. And so receiving of the sign and then falling away from that, a failure to enter into that full life, is a violation of it.

It's not just a reception of that sign and a failure to take the positive aspect of it and just entering into the negative aspect. The sign is not ambivalent in that way. In the same way the cup of the supper is given to us, not as the cup of potential curse or blessing, depending on how you receive it.

It's given to us as a cup of blessing. It can become the cup of curse for some. But when it becomes the cup of curse, it's an undermining of the proper meaning of it.

It's not just a reception of an ambivalent sign and a reception of it in a bad way. Rather, it's a reception that undermines its proper meaning, that violates it. And so this is significant.

When we're thinking about infants within the church, do we baptise? Do we admit them to communion? It's a matter of prudence. In many contexts, there is not good reason to believe that infants will enter into the full life and participation within the life of the church and in the life of Christ. You deliver the sign to them in a manner appropriate to their age, but in anticipation that they will grow up into the full enjoyment of these realities.

And where there's not good indication that that will be the case, where there's good reason to believe that they're going to abandon it or fall away, or there's not going to be the support and nurturing that gives meaning and validation to what those signs mean. I mean, if you're baptising an infant, you're baptising them in large measure on the basis of their participation in the faith of their parents. Now, if there's no real participation that corresponds to that, if there's not a faithful family context where they're being raised within the faith, then that's an undermining of the sign.

Likewise, with a situation where children are being given the supper, but they're not being given spiritual nurturing on a regular basis in the life of the family, in the life of the church more broadly. Again, do you deliver the sign in that context? No, I don't believe that you should. I believe prudentially you don't apply it in those sorts of cases.

So it's not a hard and fast rule. Rather, it's a prudential practice based upon the reality of human beings, that we are not detached individuals. We are members of communities.

And as infants, we grow up as those who participate within the life of our families. And the ideal, of course, is that we arrive in time in a proper, independent understanding of our faith and we own it for ourselves. And where that's not taking place, something's gone seriously wrong.

And so you apply the sign in the anticipation, with the reasonable anticipation that the child will grow up into its full enjoyment, the full enjoyment of that reality. And that sign will be an aid and a comfort and assurance for them on the way. But where that sign is routinely violated and treated as just a thing in itself without any mean relationship to its prospective force, then it ends up becoming of virtually no value at all.

It ends up becoming a superstitious practice, which it is in many circles. And so we need to be very aware of that danger. And there are certain arguments surrounding paedocommunion that would almost render it a very superstitious practice.

Rather than thinking of this as a prudent practice, as a part of a broader practice of Christian nurture of young kids and infants, it becomes something that is treated as talismanic or something. And it's not supposed to be like that at all. Rather, it's supposed to be part of a broader body of practice.

But this sign is not just about an individual joining of sign and significance within the brain of the recipient. It's a public sign. And as a public sign, it's significant for the whole body of the church and the surrounding world to see the body of Christ.

And so having infants participate within this is important because they too are members of the body of Christ. And as we include them in our celebration, we are declaring something to ourselves. We're declaring to ourselves that these infants, these weak and these young ones, the least within our bodies, are members of us still.

And we must learn from them. We must be those who minister to them. That God's kingdom is not just about the strong.

It's also about the weak. And it's about raising these children in the fear and admonition of the Lord. We take a responsibility for them as the weak and vulnerable members of God's household.

And that is important. That's part of the meaning of the sacrament, that the sacrament declares Christ's body. It is something that we need to recognize.

The recognition of Christ's body is the recognition of our neighbor. And that recognition of our neighbor, in part, will be including young children, including infants, including those who depend upon us for their recognition. They can't force recognition upon us.

And so our inclusion of them is part of our recognition of Christ's body. And where we fail to include them, there is a danger that that will be based upon a failure to recognize them as members of the body of Christ and our responsibility to them. So Paul's warning here, I don't think, is primarily about the subjective reflection upon the connection between sign and thing signified in a very metaphysical sense, focused upon the bread and the wine as detached objects in themselves.

And the subjective meaning as something that's very much about my individual, very cognitive faith and some relationship between past events seen in a very theological, abstract sense. Rather, it's the meaning of this body that's being formed. And that, again, is something that's appropriate to particular ages.

Paul is addressing a particular abuse here and his challenge is addressed to that particular abuse. So when Paul says something like, if a man does not work, neither shall he eat, we recognize that that's contextual. We're not going to apply that to the elderly person who's not able to work.

We're not going to apply that to the young infant who, again, is not able to work yet. They still get to eat. But we recognize that there's an appropriate context and that Paul is addressing specific people here, specific abuses.

And so when Paul talks about examining yourself, he's talking about specific practices that must be avoided. And those practices are very clear in the context. They're the context of not recognizing one's neighbor.

It's not recognizing the body of Christ, of the church. It's not recognizing that these people are participating with us. And part of that recognition, I think, is a far more public and outward looking thing than an inward looking and subjective thing.

Again, examining yourself is not an introspective, navel gazing, reflection raking over the details of your life and thinking about it in that way. No, Paul's thinking very much about the public celebration and dealing with qualifying yourself for participation in that. The contrast between the examining yourself is not an introspective thing.

It's very much a significance could be seen in prove yourself. The point being, act in a way that is appropriate, that is qualified to participate in this supper. If you're acting in a way that is divisive, in a way that is about your own interest, in a way that shows no regard for the rest of the body, then you are violating the meaning of the supper.

And so that challenge is not about an introspection. Primarily, there may be introspective elements within it on occasions, as we recognize we have a grudge against our brother and we must deal with that before we come to the altar, as it were. There's that sort of examination.

But the primary focus here is to prove yourself, to qualify yourself. And if you're not

doing that, you'll be participating in an unworthy manner. You'll be participating in a very selfish, individual, individualistic and self-centered manner, rather than a manner that truly declares and recognizes the force of Christ's death in his formation of a body that participates in his body and blood.

And where that is lacking, there is something that is so violating the meaning of the supper that it can nullify celebration altogether, that the cup of blessing can become a source of curse, that the celebration of the unity of the church becomes a manifestation of its fracturing and its vociferous nature. And so unless we get that right, I think we'll struggle to understand exactly what Paul is addressing in this passage. It is not about a very individualistic practice and reception and navel-gazing and introspection in receiving the sacrament.

No, it's about a public celebration that manifests the efficacy and the truth of Christ's death to the principalities and powers, that declares to each of us that our neighbour is a member of the body too, and that we must recognize them as such. And an event that calls upon God to act and to judge on the basis of Christ's death, to judge in a positive way, but when it's celebrated in an unworthy manner, we are calling judgment upon ourselves. And so that is the danger that Paul is addressing here.

As that relates to paedocommunion, I think it requires, first of all, a recognition that when we have infants participating, that that is part of what it means to recognize the body of Christ. It's recognizing that these children, these infants, are members too. And so that is part of what we should be examining ourselves for, what we should be proving ourselves in, that we admit to our communion all who ought to be there, even if they're weak, even if they're the small and vulnerable and those who do not yet of themselves have the capacity to push themselves forward.

That is part of what it means. Beyond that, I think there's a place for prudent practice. First of all, if this becomes a superstitious thing, where children must be admitted to every single celebration without consideration of their proper behaviour, without consideration of these sorts of things, then I think there's a superstitious practice developing.

If a child is throwing a tantrum, do not admit them to the supper. That's again, it's a sort of violation of the meaning of the supper. You do not have that sort of child participating, treating the supper as some magical ritual that's detached from its proper meaning, its proper prospective force in the forming of a united and faithful body where people love each other and where people recognize each other.

And where that's not taking place and where a child is acting in a way that would undermine or violate that, you don't admit them to the supper on that occasion and help them to rectify their behaviour so that the next time they can participate without coming in a way that sets them apart for judgment. And so I think children can participate. This

requires prudence.

This requires a recognition that they don't just participate in a magical sense. No, the meaning of this event is far more public than that. The meaning is not primarily something confectioned in our minds, nor is it something, a metaphysical act of magic.

No, it's a public event that has a prospective force where the spirit and Christ are present and where we are joined together in his body. And that receipt of that meaning is something that occurs within the public celebration, not just within the private mind of the individual believer in their individuality and in their introspection. And so I think infants can participate.

I think infants should ideally participate. The ideal is that children are coming forward and participating. Infants are celebrating too in a manner that is appropriate to their age.

And this is, again, part of the means by which they are raised into full and greater participation, where they are raised at the table of Christ, recognising that their place at that table is not on the basis of some thing that they have done first, some standard that they have reached. It's purely on the basis of God's grace. But as they are at that table, that table should lead them to manifest the full fruits over time.

It should be part of the means by which the truth of Christ's body is proclaimed to them too. So as they come of age, they will recognise what it means to be part of Christ's body, what it means to recognise their neighbours too, what it means to recognise their duty towards the weak in their communities. And so I believe paedocommunion is an appropriate and fitting practice for Paul's teaching within 1 Corinthians 11.

I believe that the danger of ill practice is particularly faced by those who would exclude children as just a general practice without being considered. I think this passage is about the recognition of Christ's body. And if you believe, as I believe, that infants can and should be baptised as members of Christ's body, then I think paedocommunion follows from that.

There must be prudence involved. But that is something that I think is fitting and appropriate. And in the normal course of events, you will be admitting infants and young children to the Lord's Supper.

Now, I realise that many people hold different, strongly different opinions to this. And I think this is an area upon which there should be legitimate room given for difference. I don't believe this is as absolute an issue as some do.

I believe that there are legitimate areas for difference. This isn't something that people have really settled in the past. This is not something upon which the church has arrived at any sort of historical or recent or local consensus.

And so I believe it's down to our prudence. I think prudence should push us in the direction of the practice of paedocommunion. But we should be patient with one another.

We should recognise that the supper is not magic, that the supper isn't something that we should be treating in a way that gives it a talismanic force. And so if your children are not admitted to the Lord's Supper within your church context, that is unfortunate. And you should, in an appropriate and submissive way, put forward a case perhaps in a way that does not cause disruption, that does not cause ill feeling and fracture of the church.

Because again, if you truly take the meaning of the supper to mean the unity of the body of Christ, then that should also apply to the way that you practice your belief in paedocommunion, the way that you argue for it. Not in a way that causes fractures within the church, that causes people to be at odds with each other, but in a way that is patient with other people who hold differing opinions, in a way that makes space for people to take the time that they need to arrive at the proper conclusions. And do not hurry that approach.

And so I think we need a lot more wisdom than has been manifested on all sides of this debate. I don't believe that I've arrived at a position yet that is completely satisfactory on this. There is a lot that I still need to think through.

But I hope this has been of some help to show where I'm coming from on the question. And if you have any further follow-up questions, please leave them with other questions in my Curious Cat account. If you'd like to support this and future videos, I have my Patreon account linked below.

Thank you so much for everyone who has supported me to this point. You've really made a lot possible that would not have been possible otherwise. And as support increases, I'd like to add further things like transcription perhaps at one point and better equipment and quality of videos would be great.

All of these are done on a shoestring and I'm sure it shows. Finally, if you found these videos helpful, please tell your friends and pass them on. Thank you very much for listening, for your time and Lord willing, I'll be back again tomorrow.

God bless.