

THE HISTORY OF PAEDOCOMMUNION: FROM THE EARLY CHURCH UNTIL 1500

by Tommy Lee

"Why not let baptized infants and children back into the Lord's Supper? This request is not nearly so strange once it is understood that infant observance of the Lord's Supper was widespread in the early church."¹ In 1975 Christian L. Keidel began his defense of the doctrine of paedocommunion with this question and assertion. Since that time, the claim that paedocommunion was a practice commonly exercised in the early church has been challenged repeatedly.² Surely the ancient custom concerning this issue is of some significance to the present generation as we wrestle with the puzzling question of paedocommunion.

Did the members of the early church include their infants and young children in their celebrations of the Lord's Supper? Is paedocommunion a doctrinal aberration in opposition to apostolic tradition with a historically defined beginning? Did the church fathers approve or disapprove of this practice? If the ancient church allowed infants and young children to commune at the Lord's Table, then why did the Western Church abandon this practice? If infants and young children *mistakenly* participated in the ancient church's communion services, then why does the Eastern Church *still* allow this practice to continue to this day? Is the *exclusion* of infants and young children from this sacrament a doctrinal aberration in opposition to apostolic tradition with a historically defined beginning? If paedocommunion was the ancient custom of the church, then was there ever any movement in the Western Church to *restore* infants and young children to the Lord's Table?

¹ Christian L. Keidel, "Is the Lord's Supper for Children?," Westminster Theological Journal XXXVII (1975): 301.

² For instance, in answer to Keidel's article, Roger T. Beckwith wrote that, "Mr. Keidel calls upon the church to return to the practice of antiquity..., but in the remotest antiquity it appears that infant and child communion did not exist." Roger T. Beckwith, "The Age of Admission to the Lord's Supper," Westminster Theological Journal XXXVIII (1976): 127. Also, Leonard J. Coppes states that "the early fathers seem to have barred infants and children from participating in the Lord's Supper." Leonard J. Coppes, Daddy, May I Take Communion? (Thornton, Colorado: Leonard J. Coppes, 1988), 35. Years before Keidel's article, Theodore G. Tappert remarked that "whether children participated in the Lord's Supper with their parents during the first centuries cannot be determined with certainty for want of evidence, but it is unlikely." Theodore G. Tappert, The Lord's Supper, (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), 43.

The purpose of this essay is to answer the above questions by surveying the church's history from the post-apostolic age until the year 1500. My thesis is that the early church did indeed bring their infants and young children to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. In order to prove my thesis, I will first examine what evidence can be gathered from secondary sources, such as church historians and scholars. Then I will determine whether the primary sources, such as church fathers and early church liturgical documents, have favored or disfavored the practice of paedocommunion. After discussing my thesis, I intend to show that the Western Church's abandonment of this practice grew out of superstitious heresies which stemmed from mistaken ideas of the transubstantiation of the elements of this sacrament. Then I will briefly review what relationship the Eastern Church has with this doctrine and why. Finally, I will discuss the attempt of the Hussites to restore infant and young child participation in the Lord's Supper at the Council of Basel in 1438.

Secondary Sources: Church Historians and Scholars

In spite of the objections mentioned above, it has commonly been the opinion of the church that infants and young children were welcome at the Lord's Supper from the very earliest days of the post-apostolic period. (To be fair to the objectors, I must make it clear that they are really only objecting to the idea that paedocommunion was common in the first and second centuries of the church. I will deal with that objection below.) One scholar summarized the evidence at hand by saying that "it is now well established that in the early days of Christianity it was not uncommon for infants to receive Communion immediately after they were baptized."³ Even John Calvin, who was adamantly opposed to paedocommunion⁴ had to admit that "this permission was indeed commonly given in the ancient church."⁵

While examining the evidence that scholars and historians from the ancient church have inadvertently left regarding this issue, one notices that this information is very "accidental". If paedocommunion was the common, ancient, non-controversial practice that I am arguing it was,

³ The Catholic Encyclopedia (New York: The Encyclopedia Press, Inc., 1908), s.v. "Communion of Children," by Patrick Morrisroe.

⁴ After defending himself from opponents who accused him of inconsistency by administering baptism to children while denying them communion, Calvin says "If these men had a particle of sound brain left, would they be blind to a thing so clear and obvious?". John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 2:1353.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 2:1352.

then this is exactly what we would expect. The ancient sources do not discuss paedocommunion as a strange or recent phenomenon; rather, it is casually mentioned as a standard part of life. Gennadius of Marseilles, one of the earliest ecclesiastical historians, was faced with a problem in the year 495. The problem was the question of how to receive some of the early church members who had been baptized by heretics in schism. Gennadius gave the following direction regarding this dilemma:

"But if they are infants (parvuli)⁶, or so dull as not to take in teaching, let those who offer them answer for them, after the manner of one about to be baptized; and so, fortified by the laying on of hands and chrism, let them be admitted to the mysteries of the Eucharist."⁷

Evagrius, who lived from c.536-600,⁸ was also one of the earliest church historians. In his *Church History*, he makes reference to "an ancient custom" at Constantinople concerning the elements of the eucharist. He reports that it was common, "when there remained a good quantity of the holy portions of the undefiled body of Christ our God, for uncorrupted boys from among those who attended the school of the undermaster to be sent for to consume them."⁹ A story is also recounted by one John Moschus, in the year 630, of some children at play who imitated, among themselves, the eucharist service. Moschus points out that these children were imitating what they had witnessed *and taken part in themselves*.¹⁰

Joseph Bingham, author of the ten volume work, *Antiquities of the Christian Church*, plainly states the terms by which the ancient church decided who would and who would not be invited to the Lord's Table when he wrote that those who "continued in heresy or schism... were of the number... to whom the church refused to give the sacrament, as persons not being in full communion with her. [However]... it is beyond dispute, that as she baptized infants, and gave

⁶ "We call attention to the word 'parvulus' when it is used in this connection, because 'infans' was sometimes applied even to the newly-baptized adult, as being newly born to a higher life." W. Smith, S. Cheetham, John Murray, eds. *A Dictionary of Christian Antiquities*, (London, 1876), s.v. "Infant Communion," by W. Smith.

⁷ Cited in Smith, 836.

⁸ J.D. Douglas, ed. *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: The Zondervan Corporation, 1978), s.v. "Evagrius," by Donald M. Lake.

⁹ (lib. iv. c. 36) Cited in Smith, 835-836.

¹⁰ Smith, 836.

them the unction of chrism with imposition of hands for confirmation, so she immediately admitted them to a participation of the eucharist, as soon as they were baptized, and ever after without exception."¹¹

"References to infant and child participation in the Lord's Supper continue... throughout the period of Charlemagne and following."¹² There are also many other church historians and scholars who believe that early evidence clearly leads one to believe that paedocommunion was a common practice in the earliest days of the ancient church. Among these are Jeremy Taylor,¹³ Eugene L. Brand,¹⁴ Williston Walker,¹⁵ R.J. Rushdoony,¹⁶ David G. Hamilton,¹⁷ Charles Crawford,¹⁸ J.H. Srawley,¹⁹ James Jordan²⁰ and Peter J. Leithart.²¹

¹¹ Joseph Bingham, *Antiquities of the Christian Church*, 10 vols. (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1856), 2:797.

¹² Keidel, 302. See also *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 835-837.

¹³ Jeremy Taylor, "Of Communicating Infants," *The Whole Works of Jeremy Taylor*, (London: Ogle, Duncan, & Co., 1822), 15:501-508.

¹⁴ Eugene L. Brand, "Baptism and Communication of Infants: A Lutheran View," *Worship* 50:7 (1976): 36. Cited in Philip Webb McLarty, "Children and the Church" (DMin thesis, Perkins School of Theology, 1981), 66.

¹⁵ Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946), 99, 274.

¹⁶ R.J. Rushdoony, *Institutes of Biblical Law*, (The Craig Press: 1976), 752f., 849.

¹⁷ David G. Hamilton and Finlay A.J. Macdonald, eds. *Children at the Table*, (Edinburgh: The Department of Education, the Church of Scotland, 1982), 22.

¹⁸ Charles Crawford, "Infant Communion: Past Tradition and Present Practice," *Theological Studies* 31:3 (1970): 524.

¹⁹ J.H. Srawley, *The Early History of the Liturgy* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1949), 234.

²⁰ James B. Jordan, "Theses on Paedocommunion," *The Geneva Papers* 1982, Geneva Divinity School.

²¹ Peter J. Leithart, *Daddy, Why was I Excommunicated*, (Niceville, Florida: Transfiguration Press, 1992), 41.

Primary Sources: Church Fathers, Liturgical Documents, etc.

When looking for clear evidence among primary sources that the early church practiced paedocommunion, one must keep in mind that "references to the Eucharist in the pre-Nicene period, though frequent, are relatively scattered, unsystematic, and allusive."²² These writers did not leave us a treatise on the Eucharist (like Tertullian did on baptism); rather, "so much of what early writers say about the Eucharist is contained in occasional allusions... [which] often emphasize only one or two aspects of this complex [doctrine]."²³ Therefore, we must often be satisfied to learn of the early church father's opinion of paedocommunion by way of anecdotal references.

Such is the case with the early church father Cyprian. Cyprian, who ministered c.250,²⁴ wrote a book called *The Lapsed*. This book dealt with the question of how the church should handle those who had "lapsed" during a time of persecution, but were now repentant. In this book, he recounts the following story:

"Some parents who by chance were escaping, being little careful on account of their terror, left a little daughter under the care of a wet-nurse. The nurse gave up the forsaken child to the magistrates. They gave it, in the presence of an idol whither the people flocked (because it was not yet able to eat flesh on account of its years), bread mingled with wine, which however itself was the remainder of what had been used in the immolation of those that had perished. Subsequently the mother recovered her child. But the girl was no more able to speak, or to indicate the crime that had been committed, than she had before been able to understand or to prevent it. Therefore it happened unawares in their ignorance, that when we were sacrificing, the mother brought it in with her.

Moreover, the girl mingled with the saints, became impatient of our prayer and supplications, and was at one moment shaken with weeping, and at another tossed about like a wave of the sea by the violent excitement of her mind; as if by the compulsion of a torturer the soul of that still tender child confessed a consciousness of the fact with such signs as it could. When, however, the solemnities were finished, and 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. Still the deacon persisted, and, although against her efforts, forced on her some of the sacrament of the cup. Then there followed a

²² G.W.H. Lampe, "The Eucharist in the Thought of the Early Church," in *Eucharistic Theology Then and Now* (London: S.P.C.K., 1968), 34.

²³ *Ibid.*, 36.

²⁴ Douglas, s.v. "Cyprian," by D.F. Wright.

sobbing and vomiting. In a profane body and mouth the Eucharist could not remain; the draught sanctified in the blood of the Lord burst forth from the polluted stomach. So great is the Lord's power, so great is His majesty. The secrets of darkness were disclosed under His light, and not even hidden crimes deceived God's priest."²⁵

Although we may not completely agree with Cyprian's interpretation of these events, it is clear that there was nothing at all unusual about allowing "the little child" to participate in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

Cyprian alludes to infant and young child communion again in this same book when he imagines the plea that the children of *apostate* parents will make to the Lord on judgment day. As Cyprian thinks about God's charge against these children (because their parents took them to pagan temples to partake of the sacrifices there), he struggles with the consequences of parental rebellion.

"Could the servant of God, who had already renounced the devil and the world, stand there and speak and renounce Christ?... But for many their own destruction was not enough... And that nothing might be lacking to cap the crime, infants also, placed in the arms of parents or led by them, lost as little ones what they had gained at the very first beginning of their nativity. When the day of judgment comes, will they not say: 'We have done nothing; *we have not abandoned the Lord's bread and cup and of our own accord* hastened to profane the contaminations. The perfidy of others has ruined us...'"²⁶ (my italics)

In Cyprian's time it is undeniably a matter of course for *all* of the church, including the infants and young children, to participate in the Lord's Supper.

We find further primary evidence in favor of the early practice of paedocommunion in the *Apostolic Constitutions*. This work is attributed to Clement of Rome (c.90), but was actually compiled by "an Eastern Arian in the late fourth century."²⁷ The twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth chapters of the eighth book of the Constitutions describe an early church communion service. According to this account, no non-communicating persons may remain in attendance for

²⁵ Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1951), 5:444.

²⁶ Roy Joseph Deferrari, *The Fathers of the Church*, (New York: The Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1959), 64-65.

²⁷ Douglas, s.v. "Apostolic Constitutions," by G.T.D. Angel.

the observance of the Lord's Supper. Before the eucharist may be observed, the deacon must say, "Let none of the catechumens, let none of the hearers, let none of the unbelievers, let none of the heterodox, stay here."²⁸ We notice immediately that there is no direction given that would preclude infants and young children from the upcoming ceremony.

On the contrary, after the catechumens, hearers, unbelievers, and heterodox depart, the deacon begins the service by inviting the remaining believers with the following words (all italics are mine): "*Let the mothers receive their children*; let no one have anything against any one; let no one come in hypocrisy; let us stand upright before the Lord with fear and trembling, to offer."²⁹ What follows next is a very careful, comprehensive, four-and-a-half page long prayer. Near the end of the prayer, the people *in attendance* are prayed for ("this people"³⁰) according to their differing circumstances. The minister prays, "for those that are in virginity and purity; for the widows of the Church; for those in honourable marriage and childbearing; *for the infants of Thy people...*".³¹ It is striking to note how the infants and children of the church were included in *every* aspect of this service. And lest we suspect that the infants and children were present but did not commune, the author of the Constitutions then describes the order in which those present were to come to the Lord's Supper. "And after that, let the bishop partake, then the presbyters, and deacons, and sub-deacons, and the readers, and the singers, and the ascetics; and then of the women, the deaconesses, and the virgins, and the widows; *then the children*; and then all the people in order, with reverence and godly fear, without tumult."³² Far from being excluded, the children were communicated *before* the adults without a special "office" of some type.

After everyone had participated in the communion service, the bishop gave thanks again to God and prayed once more for the people. Included in this prayer are the following words: "sanctify Thy people, keep those that are in virginity, preserve those in the faith that are in marriage, strengthen those that are in purity, *bring the infants to complete age*, confirm the newly admitted; instruct the catechumens, and render them worthy of admission...".³³ Again we see the infants included in the communion prayers, but what is especially remarkable about this prayer is

²⁸ Roberts, 7:486.

²⁹ Ibid., 7:486.

³⁰ Ibid., 7:490.

³¹ Ibid., 7:490.

³² Ibid., 7:490.

³³ Ibid., 7:491.

that the infants are set apart from the catechumens whom God must prepare for admission into the Lord's Supper. We see no prayer that God would make the infants and young children "worthy of admission" one day. They are born into the church and naturally included in the church's communion service.

The third primary source which speaks to the issue of paedocommunion comes from the sermons of St. Augustine, who lived from 354-430.³⁴ Again, we see that since infant and young child participation was a common practice in the ancient church, there is only an indirect, "accidental" reference to it. While preaching on 1 Timothy 1:15, against the Pelagians³⁵ (Sermon 174,7), Augustine remarks (*italics are mine*):

"Those who say that infancy has nothing in it for Jesus to save, are denying that Christ is Jesus for all believing infants. Those, I repeat, who say that infancy has nothing in it for Jesus to save, are saying nothing else than that for believing infants, infants that is who have been baptized in Christ, Christ the Lord is not Jesus. After all, what is Jesus? Jesus means Savior. Jesus is the Savior. Those whom he doesn't save, having nothing to save in them, well for them he isn't Jesus. Well now, if you can tolerate the idea that Christ is not Jesus for some persons who have been baptized, then I'm not sure your faith can be recognized as according with the sound rule. Yes, they're infants, but they are his members. *They're infants, but they receive his sacraments. They are infants, but they share in his table*, in order to have life in themselves."³⁶

Once more, there are statements in the above paragraph which may make the modern American evangelical uneasy, but by referring to the Lord's "table," St. Augustine has provided us with another bit of sound evidence that infants and young children were regularly communed in the church of his day. Augustine again betrayed the normalcy of paedocommunion in his day when he wrote the following:

³⁴ Douglas, s.v. "Augustine of Hippo," by D.F. Wright.

³⁵ "When dealing with Augustine it is important first to make one point: while the Pelagian crisis directs Augustine's thought towards infants and children in a particular way, the themes he uses in his antipelagian writings are already well established in his works. The assertion that is often made - that Augustine's interest in the question is purely a matter of anti-pelagian polemic - is without foundation." Geiko Muller-Fahrenholz, ed. and do not hinder them, Faith and Order Paper No. 109 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), 60.

³⁶ Saint Augustine, The Works of Saint Augustine, trans. Edmund Hill, ed. John E. Rotelle, 11 vols. Part III-Sermons. (New Rochelle, New York: New City Press, 1992), 5:261.

"Why is the blood, which of the likeness of sinful flesh was shed for the remission of sins, ministered that the little one (*parvulus*) may drink, that he may have life, unless he hath come to death by a beginning of sin on the part of some one?"³⁷

The fourth piece of primary evidence comes from a fifth or early sixth century Syrian who writes under the name of Dionysius. Among his extant writings is *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, "which describes the sacraments and the three 'ways' of spiritual life."³⁸ At the end of this work, the author is directing his comments toward someone who has made an objection to the church's practice of baptizing and communicating infants and young children even though they (the infants and children) do not understand either sacrament. The author defends the church with the following words (all italics are mine):

"The fact that children not yet able to understand divine things become recipients of the holy rebirth in God [baptism] *and the most sacred symbols of the supremely divine Communion* seems, as you say, to merit the legitimate ridicule of the profane, for it is as though the bishops teach divine things to those who cannot hear, and in vain hand down the sacred traditions to those who do not understand. not all divine things can be comprehended by our intelligence, but many things unknown by us have reasons worthy of their divine character that escape us, but are understood by the superior orders. Many things are beyond even the most sublime beings and are known distinctly only by the all-wise God, the Source of wisdom. Nevertheless, we affirm on this matter what our godlike instructors, *initiated in ancient tradition*, have transmitted to us.

"They assert, and it is the truth, that *infants* brought up according to sacred law will contract a habit of holiness, be guarded from all error, and be inexperienced in an evil life. When our godly leaders arrived at this conclusion, they decided to receive *infants* in this holy manner: on condition that the physical parents of the child presented confide the child to someone of the initiated in divine things who is a good teacher I do not think there is anything absurd if the child is brought up according to a divine education, since he has a master and holy sponsor who implants in him a habit for divine things and keeps him safe from what is contrary. The bishop *gives the child a share in the sacred symbols* in order that he may be nourished by them and have no other life than that of always contemplating divine things, sharing in them by holy progressions,

³⁷ Cited in The Catholic Encyclopedia, 836.

³⁸ Douglas, s.v. "Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite," by Peter Toon.

acquiring a holy disposition for them, being educated to holiness by his godlike sponsor."³⁹

Again, we may not defend all of the practices that this author describes, but it is an indisputable fact that the church of his day brought their infants and young children to the Lord's Supper. He even appeals to the fact that his instructors were initiated into this practice as an "ancient tradition".

Ancient church councils also "accidentally" mention the common practice of paedocommunion. In 585 the council of Macon, in France, ordered that on Wednesdays and Fridays the infants and children of the church should be brought back to the church where they "should receive the remains of the sacrifices."⁴⁰ The council of Toledo, in 675, even "found it necessary to reassure anxious minds by a declaration that the sick who found themselves unable to swallow the eucharist, and others who had failed to swallow it 'in times of infancy,' did not fall under the censure of the first council of Toledo (can. 14), against those who having received did not consume it (can. 11)."⁴¹

Objections

As I stated above,⁴² there are those who argue that paedocommunion is an aberrant practice which surfaced for the first time in the third century. Most objectors claim that infant and young child communion probably "originated in a mistaken notion of the absolute necessity of the Blessed Eucharist for salvation."⁴³ Keidel sheds doubt on this dismissive solution with the following questions:

"It is true that the rationale usually given in the early church for infant inclusion in the Supper was that eternal life was thereby secured on the basis of John 6:53. But was this rationale originally responsible for introducing the Supper to infants, or was it a distorted

³⁹ Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, *Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, trans. Thomas L. Campbell (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, Inc., 1981) 89-91.

⁴⁰ Cited in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 836.

⁴¹ *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 836.

⁴² See footnote 2.

⁴³ *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 170.

view later imposed upon what was an original apostolic practice? The same question may be asked of infant baptism. Was the doctrine of baptismal regeneration the rationale for infant baptism in the early church, or was it a distorted view later placed upon what was an apostolic practice? Church history has not been able to settle these questions. Earlier documentation is needed."⁴⁴

The documentation that we have for the first and second centuries is inconclusive when considered alone. Leonard J. Coppes, one of the primary opponents to the theory that the church of the first and second centuries communed infants and young children, has written that "it is difficult to know whether or not the church of the days of Justin and Irenaeus admitted young children to the Lord's table."⁴⁵ However, in the end Coppes decides that "prior to the third century, ... it appears that Ignatius and all the others held that only those who had made a credible profession of faith were to be admitted to the Lord's table."⁴⁶ In order to prove his theory that the church of the first and second centuries did not practice paedocommunion, Coppes cites passages from Ignatius, Justin, Origen, and the Didascalia.

The space limitations of this essay does not allow for the systematic study of each of these passages. However, Peter J. Leithart had taken each of Coppes' historical arguments and has shown that they do not prove what Coppes has set out to prove.⁴⁷ The following is but a short example of Leithart's critique of Coppes' logic (concerning the passage from the Didascalia):

"Coppes cites the following passage (p. 42):

‘Honour the bishops, who have loosed you from your sins, who by the water regenerated you, who filled you with the Holy Spirit, who reared you with the word as with milk, who bred you up with teaching, who established you with admonition, and made you to partake of the holy eucharist of God, and made you partakers and joint-heirs of the promise of God.’

Roger Beckwith [whom Coppes relies on heavily] calls attention to the 'significant' order: 'The bishop's flock had first been baptized, then been reared with a long course of teaching, and finally, in maturity, been admitted to communion' (p. 42). Such a reading

⁴⁴ Keidel, 305.

⁴⁵ Coppes, 43.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 43.

⁴⁷ Leithart, 34-41.

makes far more of the passage than common sense warrants. There is no obvious reason to understand the arrangement of clauses chronologically, and to understand them in this way distorts the passage. If the order is 'significant,' then we also may conclude that the bishop looses from sins *before* applying the waters of regeneration, that rearing up with the word *preceded* teaching, and that all this preceded becoming partakers of the promise of God. It is far more probable that, in the understanding of the writer, the 'loosing from sin' took place in baptism, and that rearing with the Word and teaching are to be understood as synonyms. The passage does not provide an *ordo salutis*, but simply lists various dimensions of ministry of the bishop. If the passage is not chronologically arranged, it provides no clear evidence against paedocommunion."⁴⁸ (Leithart's italics)

It seems to me that Coppes, Beckwith, and others are willing to go to extreme lengths in order to convince their readers that the practice of paedocommunion suddenly appeared in the third century without prior existence. The first and second century references which they cite are twisted into *possible*, but certainly not confident anti-paedocommunion interpretations. It is much more natural to assume that the ubiquitous practice which Cyprian and others refer to was also common in the first and second centuries, yet we are without extant references to it.

Abandoned in the West

If paedocommunion was the common practice of the church in ancient days, then why do we not practice it today? Keidel asserts that infants and children were forbidden from the Lord's Supper because of "the doctrine of transubstantiation and the doctrine of concomitance (i.e., that Christ is present entirely under either kind)... The fear that infants and children might spill the wine and thereby profane the actual body and blood of the Lord appears to have been the primary reason for this discontinuance."⁴⁹ Actually, it was not only the infants and children who

⁴⁸ Ibid., 40.

⁴⁹ Keidel, 302. In his fifteenth footnote, Keidel cites the following works as support for this assertion. "Adolph Harnack, *History of Dogma*, vol. vi, tr. by William McGilchrist, William and Norgue, Covent Garden, London 1899, p. 240; Augustus Neander, *General History of the Christian Religion and Church*, vol. 4, Boston 1871, pp. 341ff." Keidel then goes on to say, "Other reasons for withdrawing the cup were hygienic and out of fear of disease. It should also be remembered that removal of the cup from the laity enhanced the dignity of the priest at a time in which the Roman Catholic Church was seeking an individuality of its own after the split with the Orthodox Church in 1054." Charles Crawford agrees that there were various reasons for the abandonment of infant communion. He categorizes the factors as hygienic (fear of disease), practical (doctrine of concomitance), and dogmatic (demand for intelligent reception). Crawford, 533-534; Other *contributing* factors may include the separation of confirmation from the time of baptism (made necessary because Christianity grew rapidly while the number of bishops did not)

ceased drinking the "transubstantiated" wine. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries *all* of the laity (in the West), adults included, began to back away from the cup.⁵⁰

The Fourth Lateran Council (in 1215) gave the doctrine of transubstantiation "full dogmatic authority."⁵¹ But even before the Fourth Lateran Council, it had long been common belief that when the priest spoke the words of consecration over the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper "the 'accidents' (shape, taste, and the like) [would] remain unaltered, [but] the 'substance' ... [would be] transformed into the very body and blood of Christ."⁵² It was the fear of mishandling the very blood of Jesus that caused the laity to want to partake of the bread only. In the words of the historian Williston Walker:

"A withdrawal of the cup instigated by the clergy did not take place. The abandonment of the cup was rather a layman's practice due to fear of dishonoring the sacrament by misuse of the wine. Such anxiety had manifested itself as early as the seventh century in the adoption of the Greek custom of dipping the bread in the wine—a practice repeatedly disapproved by ecclesiastical authority, but supported by lay sentiment. By the twelfth century the laity were avoiding the use of the wine altogether, apparently first in England. By the time of Aquinas lay communion in the bread alone had become prevalent."⁵³

which encouraged a break down in the three part rite of initiation into the church (baptism, confirmation, eucharist) and the development of the idea of childhood. See Hamilton, 22-25.

⁵⁰ Walker, 274; McLarty, 66; It is not surprising that so many sacramental changes were happening at this time when we realize the fear that the people had of the transubstantiated elements. "A Christian society that has degenerated to such a state that it becomes necessary to legislate that Christians need receive the eucharist once a year is fertile for most anything to take place in the context of baptism and the eucharist. The whole vision of what the eucharist was, and what its relationship was to the community had so changed that the process could take place unresisted, except in those places where tradition was being asserted for political rather than theological reasons...it is this degeneration... of the sacraments during the middle ages that provided the theological and cultural milieu in which infants and the young could stop receiving the eucharist... We should not be surprised then to find a North German synod, on the eve of the Reformation, declaring that it is unseemly for the laity ever to receive the eucharist." Muller-Fahrenholz, 63-64.

⁵¹ Walker, 274.

⁵² Ibid., 274.

⁵³ Ibid., 274.

When the laity denied themselves the cup, they continued to believe that they were still receiving both the body and the blood of Christ while only eating the bread because of the doctrine of concomitance (defined above). In fact, "although ... [concomitance] is a logical extension of the theory of transubstantiation, the practical pressure for this doctrine of concomitance was provided by the withdrawal of the cup from the laity within the Roman Church."⁵⁴

Now that the laity was only communicating in one kind (the bread), the infants of the church were *ipso facto* excommunicated from the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.⁵⁵

The infants of the church had long only communicated in wine (or bread dipped in wine) because of the difficulty they would have in swallowing bread.⁵⁶ The commonality of this practice is evidenced for us in a letter that Pope Paschalis the Second (in the 12th century) wrote to Pontius, the abbot of Cluny. He says (my italics), "As Christ communicated bread and wine, each by itself, and it *ever had been so observed in the church*, it ever should be so done in the future, *save in the case of infants* and of the sick, who as a general thing, could not eat bread."⁵⁷ In order to justify the withdrawing of all infant participation in the Lord's Supper, the church began to teach (in the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, the Council of Bordeaux in 1255, and the Council of Trent in 1545-1563)⁵⁸ that "infants received all that was necessary for salvation in baptism, and that little children, therefore, were not in danger of losing their salvation if they waited until the age of discretion before partaking of the eucharist, at which time they would eat with more respect and understanding."⁵⁹ In a further attempt to justify the termination of

⁵⁴ Douglas, s.v. "concomitance" by Carl S. Meyer.

⁵⁵ "When the chalice was finally withheld from the laity, it meant that infants no longer could receive communion at all, since the church had become accustomed to communing infants only under the form of wine. The conclusion was simple: no wine, no, communion for infants. Infant communion, at least as a common practice, disappeared in the Western church during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries." David L. Percy, "Infant Communion Part I: The Historical Practice," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 7:1 (1980): 45; Mark D. Tranvik, "Should Infants be Communed? A Lutheran Perspective," *Word & World* 15:1 (1995): 84; Crawford, 529-530; Muller-Fahrenheit, 62; Roger Kent Peters, "A Theological Rationale for the Administration of Communion to Persons who are Profoundly Mentally Retarded" (D.Min. diss., Lancaster Theological Seminary, 1986), 21-89.

⁵⁶ McLarty, 66; *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 170; Percy, 45; Crawford, 527-528.

⁵⁷ Keidel, 302.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 303.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 303.

paedocommunion, the Fourth Lateran Council also came to "the landmark decision that confession must precede communion and that first communion should occur at the 'age of discretion.'"⁶⁰ Therefore, communion becomes associated with confession instead of baptism. "Infants who had enjoyed full membership in the church in times past were reduced to catechumen status by the actions of the Lateran Council and the Council of Trent."⁶¹

Even though the practice of communicating infants after their baptism began to disappear in the West during the twelfth century, there were still some pockets of the Western Church that continued the tradition up until the time of the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century.⁶² And even where paedocommunion had ceased, other rites were often substituted "(e.g. the newly baptized were given the ablutions or unconsecrated wine at the mass after their baptism)."⁶³

⁶⁰ McLarty, 66; "After the Lateran Council decree of 1215, the Catholic Church prescribed the following sequence for the reception of the seven sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation, Penance, the Eucharist, Matrimony or Orders, and Extreme Unction... Since 1215 both boys and girls who had reached the age of discretion were required to confess their sins and to receive the Eucharist annually... Thus the Western Church in the High Middle Ages viewed young children under the age of discretion as catechumens, individuals who were intermediate between infants and adults." Richard L. Demolen, "Childhood and the Sacraments in the Sixteenth Century," *Archiv fur Reformationsgeschichte*, 66 (1975): 52-55.

⁶¹ DeMolen, 51-52.

⁶² "In July, 1562, the Council of Trent considered the matter of children and communion and issued a statement, one of four points on the sacrament, with four anathemas. This fourth point, and all four anathemas, read as follows: IV. Children below the age of reason are not obliged to receive the sacrament of Communion, because at that age they cannot lose grace. However, the opposite custom, which is ancient and preserved in some places, is not to be condemned, because it is doubtless to be believed that it was not done as necessary for salvation but for some other reason. "In conformity with this doctrine four anathemas were read: I. Against whoever says that all the faithful are obliged to receive the Eucharist under both kinds, either by divine command or as necessary for their salvation. II. Against whoever says that the Catholic Church has no good reason or that it has erred in giving the laity and those not celebrating Mass Communion under the form of bread alone. III. Against whoever denies that Christ, fount and author of all grace, is received under the form of bread alone. IV. Against whoever says that the sacrament of the Eucharist is necessary for children below the age of reason. "It is significant that Trent recognized that communion by children was a practice 'ancient and preserved in some places' and 'not to be condemned.'" Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (The Craig Press, 1976), 849.

⁶³ David R. Holeton, "The Communion of Infants and Hussitism," *Communio Viatorum*, 27:4 (1984), 224.

Also, sometimes the infant was "simply brought to the altar where the words of administration were pronounced but communion was not actually given."⁶⁴

Preserved in the East

The Eastern Orthodox Church, which finally fully separated from the Western Church in 1054,⁶⁵ never went through the "Western" struggles over the doctrine of transubstantiation. In fact, "they would consider a term like 'transubstantiation' (metousiosis) improper to designate the Eucharistic mystery... Transubstantiation ... appears only in the writings of the *Latinophrones* of the thirteenth century, and is nothing but a straight translation from the Latin."⁶⁶ In their theological constructs, "the Eucharist is neither a symbol to be 'contemplated' from outside nor an 'essence' distinct from humanity, but Jesus Himself, the risen Lord, 'made known through the breaking of bread' (Lk 24:35); Byzantine theologians rarely speculated beyond this realistic and soteriological affirmation of the Eucharistic presence as that of the glorified humanity of Christ."⁶⁷

Having never been frightened away from the Lord's Supper, but rather growing into a sense that "the Eucharist is the... sacrament which truly transforms a human community into 'the Church of God,'"⁶⁸ the Eastern Church maintained the tradition of paedocommunion as a normal part of church life.⁶⁹ Even today in the Eastern Church, "immediately after receiving baptism and confirmation, the child is admitted to Eucharistic communion. There is, therefore,[in the Eastern Church] no practical difference between admitting a child or an adult to membership in the

⁶⁴ David R. Holeton, "The Communion of Infants: The Basel Years," *Communio Viatorum*, 29:1 (1986), 38.

⁶⁵ "In 1054 occurred the Great Schism which marked the separation of the Orthodox Church in the East from the Roman Church in the West. The East and West had been growing further apart economically, politically, and culturally, but at the end when the split came doctrinal issues were given as the cause." Douglas, s.v. "Eastern Orthodox Church" by Barbara L. Faulkner.

⁶⁶ John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1987), 203-204.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 204.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 206.

⁶⁹ Crawford, 528.

Church; in both cases, a human being who belonged to the 'old Adam' through his natural birth is introduced to 'new life' by partaking of baptism, chrismation, and holy communion."⁷⁰

The Hussites Fight to Restore Paedocommunion in the West

On July 6, 1415, the Bohemian Reformer John Huss was burned at the stake after being invited to defend himself at the Council of Constance. After his death, his followers, the Hussites (who would much later come to be known as the Moravians),⁷¹ angrily "gathered in solemn assembly and announced their agreement with Huss."⁷² Facing a possible military attack, the Hussites eventually agreed to *Four Articles* which would serve as "the basis of Bohemian resistance."⁷³ The *Four Articles* are best known for their defense of the restoration of the cup to the laity and their argument for frequent communion. "Less well known, perhaps, is that the Hussites also pleaded for the restoration of infant participation in the Lord's Supper."⁷⁴

David R. Holeton has written two excellent essays examining the issue of paedocommunion in the Hussite reform movement.⁷⁵ In these essays, Holeton affirms that the Hussites did indeed restore frequent communion, communion in both "kinds" (bread and cup), and infant communion (beginning in 1417) to their churches.⁷⁶ However, infant communion among the Hussites was suppressed in the late autumn of 1418 when King Wenceslas expelled

⁷⁰ Meyendorff, 192.

⁷¹ Douglas, s.v. "Moravian Brethren" by J.G.G. Norman.

⁷² Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 2 vols. (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1984), 1:351-352.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 352.

⁷⁴ Keidel, 303. As an aside that extends slightly beyond the bounds of this essay, it is interesting to note that the Hussites have not been the only ones concerned to restore paedocommunion to the Western Church. A few Reformers also shared this vision, including Wolfgang Musculus (1497-1563) and Jeremy Taylor (1613-1667). *Ibid.*, 301, 304.

⁷⁵ Holeton, "The Communion of Infants and Hussitism," 207-225. and Holeton, "The Communion of Infants: The Basel Years," 15-40.

⁷⁶ "In a period of only fifty years the greatest revolution in western mediaeval sacramental practice has been accomplished. The laity, most of whom had received the eucharist only once a year for more than two hundred years, had, ... begun to receive communion weekly, if not daily. More than that, the cup and infant communion, both of which had disappeared from most of western Europe for several centuries, had been restored." Holeton, "The Communion of Infants and Hussitism," 217.

Hussite priests in an effort to restore catholic order to his realm. During 1419, Wenceslas relented and made some minor concessions to the Hussites, but continued to forbid the practice of paedocommunion. At this time, the Hussites zealously fought to restore infants and children to the table by way of petitions, tracts, and sermons, often denouncing those "who have allowed their own will to triumph, rather than the authority of Scripture, in the matter of infant communion."⁷⁷ It was during the struggle with Wenceslas that the Hussites rallied around the *Four Articles*. The first article included the statement for paedocommunion. It read in part (Holeton's italics):

"that the holy sacrament of the body and blood of the Lord, in both kinds, bread and wine, be freely given *to all true Christians who are not barred from it by deadly sin*; just as our Saviour instituted and commanded it."⁷⁸

In June of 1421, the wording of the article was changed so as to clarify any doubt about the intent of the italicized portion. It now read (Holeton's italics): "... the Eucharist is to be given in both kinds to all true Christians, *old and young* ...".⁷⁹ Eventually the Council of Basel was held to resolve the differences between the Hussites and the Roman Church. The issue of infant and young child participation in the Lord's Supper was at least twice debated at Basel, once in February of 1433 and again in 1437.

During these debates, the Hussites made strong arguments in favor of paedocommunion. When they argued from history, they "demonstrated beyond any reasonable doubt that in the Western Church all the baptized received communion until at least the 12th century and then in some places until the 14th."⁸⁰ However, in the end the Hussites lost "legal" rights to communicate their infants and children. Upon evaluation of the Council of Basel, Holeton remarks, "one can only conclude that the Council entered this debate with its mind closed, never for a moment allowing for the possibility that infants and young children would be admitted to eucharistic communion."⁸¹

⁷⁷ Quote taken out of a Hussite sermon. Ibid., 216.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 217.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 217.

⁸⁰ Holeton, "The Communion of Infants: The Basel Years," 35.

⁸¹ Ibid., 36.

Even though the council had decided against the Hussites on the question of admitting infants and young children to the Lord's Supper, the practice continued until after "The Battle of the White Mountain" in 1620. The Hussites had "remained unconvinced by the conciliar arguments and refused to admit that the Church could change what they understood to be divine precept."⁸²

Conclusion

From the third century until the twelfth and thirteenth century there is overwhelming evidence that the Western Church regularly brought her infants and young children to participate in the Lord's Supper. This is evidenced by several primary sources and substantiated by numerous secondary sources. Before this time, "we have no unambiguous evidence about the practice"⁸³ of paedocommunion. However, not even the most ardent opponents of infant and young child communion have been able to adequately explain why it "suddenly" became the common and universal practice of the church in the third century. The most logical explanation of the church's third century paedocommunion practice is that it was the same as the church's first and second century paedocommunion practice. The efforts of Coppes and others to shed doubt on the presence of infant and young child communion in the first and second centuries have been ineffective. We do not have any direct references to paedocommunion in first or second century documents, but as soon as references to this practice appear, (far from being considered novel) they are accidental remarks about a practice as common and ordinary as going to sleep at night.

In the West, history records the infants and young children of the church being denied the Lord's Supper for the first time in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. It is important to note that "the Lord's Supper was lost to the church's children in the west not as a result of a purification of the church's practice of the sacrament but rather as the result of a horrible corruption of it."⁸⁴ There were three or four minor realities that deterred people from having their infants and children communed, but the primary reason for their exclusion was the superstitious fear of the elements provoked by the theory of transubstantiation.

In Eastern Christianity , there has never been a reason to discontinue the ancient tradition of paedocommunion which has been handed down to them from the early church. "Still today in

⁸² Ibid., 35.

⁸³ Leithart, 34.

⁸⁴ Robert S. Rayburn, "Report of the Ad-Interim Committee to Study the Question of Paedocommunion," in PCA Digest Position Papers 1973-1993 Part V, ed. Paul R. Gilchrist (Atlanta: Presbyterian Church in America, 1993), 513.

the Eastern Orthodox Church, infants [receive]... the three sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist, within a few minutes of each other, and in that order."⁸⁵

There have been a few reformational attempts in the West to restore the early church's custom of communing her infants and young children, but these endeavors have never totally won the day. The most famous of these attempts came from the fifteenth century Hussites. The following is a portion of one of their communion hymns:

"You gave us his body to eat,
His holy blood to drink
What more could he have done for us?

"Let us not deny it to little children
Nor forbid them
When they eat Jesus' body.

"Of such is the kingdom of heaven
As Christ himself told us,
And holy David says also:

"From the mouths of small children
And of all innocent babes
Has come forth God's praise
That the adversary may be cast down.

"Praise God, you children You tiny babes, For he will not drive you away, But feed you on his holy body."⁸⁶

⁸⁵ DeMolen, 54-55.

⁸⁶ Cited in Rayburn, 514.