

Children and the Jesus Supper

Some anecdotal and theological reflections

Gordon Zerbe
Associate Professor of New Testament
Canadian Mennonite University

My eight-year old daughter, Silvie, is hooked on the Jesus Supper, as our family calls the feast. No, she doesn't participate—directly—with adult believers in our local Mennonite

My eight-year-old daughter, Silvie, is hooked on the Jesus Supper. She is enthralled with this communal ritual, and longs intensely to join in more fully as an expression of her devotion to Jesus and his way.

congregation. But she is enthralled with this communal ritual, and longs intensely to join in more fully as an expression of her devotion to Jesus and his way.

Several experiences have whetted her appetite. Besides observing the rite in church, she has learned about it in Sunday school through the Jubilee curriculum's fine treatment,¹ which we have also used for nurture at home and even as the text for an adult service. But most significant is her memory of the high drama of monthly

coconut communion when our family was in the Philippines with Mennonite Central Committee. There the United Church of Christ in the Philippines congregation welcomed her to participate along with adults. After the congregation rehearsed the life-sustaining properties of the coconut for Filipino society, the liturgy came to a high point. Holding up the coconut, the presider recited, "The body of Christ which is broken for us," and then with a couple loud whacks of a bolo knife cracked it open (a feat requiring considerable skill). After letting the juice flow into a bowl, the liturgist raised the bowl and proclaimed, "The blood of Christ which is shed for us." The stillness was filled with an awe that was palpable each time. The gathered congregation, children and adults together, then came forward and joyfully partook of coconut meat dipped in coconut milk.

We found it difficult to explain to Silvie why she would not be participating in communion on our return to Winnipeg. Having tasted the medicine of immortality—as Ignatius (ca. 110 C.E.) described the elements in more sacramental terms²—she didn’t want to be weaned from it. “What do you mean, children can’t follow Jesus like adults?” Because so much was different, the explanation that seemed to work best at the time was: “Well, we just practice things differently here.”

Silvie still closely observes what the adults are doing in communion, and she’s developing an awareness of communal solidarity inherent in the ritual. Last year for the Maundy Thursday service, usually an adult-only event in our church, the liturgist asked her to help in a candle ceremony in preparation for sharing bread and cup around a table. Participants were invited to the table in groups. After serving each other, they ate and drank in concert. Just before I was to go to the table with the next group, Silvie leaned over and whispered, “Can you bring some

We found it difficult to explain to Silvie why she would not be participating in communion on our return to Winnipeg. Having tasted the medicine of immortality—as Ignatius described it—she did not want to be weaned. “What do you mean, children can’t follow Jesus like adults?”

back for me?” I did sneak a little extra morsel of the bread and brought it back to her. I wondered if she might eat it right away, but instead from the back row she intently watched as the next group served each other at the table, carefully holding her piece of bread. And then simultaneously with the group of adults around the centre table, she solemnly ate her piece.

So, in our family we’ve come up with a compromise: our children do not go directly to the table, or take directly from the tray passed around. But if they ask, we break a small piece off our own piece, or save an extra drop in our individual communion cups, so that our children can partake along with the baptised communicants. I am thus reminded of my role as primary nurturer and mediator of the faith at this stage in their lives, and they experience some sense of participation, while realising that this ritual is especially for baptised believers.

At the same time, Silvie is becoming a self-conscious Anabaptist. Last Christmas Eve, our family attended the Anglican

church where my brother-in-law, Peter John Hobbs, is the priest, and where Silvie's cousins participate regularly in the Eucharist. It started to look awkward, to say the least, when the three cousins received the host and the cup as is customary for them. Eventually, Peter John could not keep from serving the non-baptised cousins, though this is not his usual practice. It must have been the look of disappointment on their faces.³ After the service my wife, Wendy, overheard a conversation between Silvie and her cousin, who seemed bewildered: "So, why aren't you baptised, Silvie?" Almost pontificating to her slightly younger cousin, Silvie replied, "Well, in the Mennonite church, I have to wait till I'm a teenager. Let's see," she mused, counting on her fingers, "that's at least five more years for me. I still have a lot more to learn." Her cousin, still incredulous, burst out, "But Silvie, you already know the whole Christmas story!" referring to her recitation of Luke 2:1–20, which Peter John had dubbed the sermon that evening. Later, bounding into the house, my six-year-old son, Micah, couldn't hold in his excitement and announced to those who had been absent, "I got to be in the Jesus Supper!" To which his grandfather remarked, "I wonder how much he really understood of it."

I was surprised that Silvie had explained the Mennonite delay in baptism and communion in connection with learning or understanding. Wendy and I thought we had carefully avoided that line of explanation, emphasising instead the matter of adult choices and responsibilities. But from Silvie's point of view, adult choice and responsibility are apparently about needing to learn more.

I

It is the notion of requisite understanding that has until recently been the main barrier to welcoming children in communion in western churches that practice infant baptism. Responding to the common conviction "that the Eucharist must be rationally understood before it can be rightly received," Laurence Stookey, writing from a Methodist perspective, raises the following questions: "Do we indeed believe that the Eucharist is a means that facilitates the growth of faith rather than a reward for faith

achieved? Do we indeed believe that persons of all ages can know (even if in different ways and to various degrees) the presence of the risen Christ? Do we also believe that the Eucharist is more to be experienced than explained? And how do the barriers we have placed around the table concerning the age of communicants stand up against our answers to these questions?"⁴

Orthodox churches, without this legacy of emphasis on the rationality of faith, have always included infants and children in

Increasing numbers of western churches practising infant baptism are welcoming young children and infants at the table. If the Eucharist is the celebration of membership, and baptism is the rite of entry, how can the Eucharist be denied any baptised person, infant included?

communion. At any rate, beginning in the 1970s, this barrier has been crumbling as increasing numbers of western churches practising infant baptism are welcoming young children and infants at the table.⁵ As Peter John puts it, if the Eucharist is the celebration of membership, and baptism is the rite of entry, how can the Eucharist be denied any baptised person, infant included?⁶

Mennonite congregations have not remained unaffected. Both through an ecumenical awareness of expanded participation by children in other churches, and through dynamics internal to Mennonite churches, increasing numbers of Mennonites are welcoming children in communion. A

1996 survey on church membership, baptism, and communion, conducted by the Resources Commission of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada (now Mennonite Church Canada), yielded the following results. Approximately 300 surveys were sent out; more than 100 churches responded. Twenty-three percent of the responses affirmed the somewhat ambiguous statement that "the practice of communion in our congregation is open to unbaptized youth and children." While 59 percent affirmed the general statement that "our congregation seeks to include children (13 & under) in the celebration of communion," 30 percent affirmed that they did not. But 86 percent of all respondents affirmed that they seek to include children "by having them present but not partaking," while 25 percent affirmed that they seek to include children "by partaking in communion with the parent's discretion."⁷ This discrepancy suggests that 14 percent of the

congregations were fully welcoming to children, while an additional 9 percent preferred that children not participate, but did not bar those whose parents encouraged it.

Anabaptists are now in a new situation, relative to infant-baptising counterparts. In the past, emphasis on maturity and proper understanding as a prerequisite for participation in communion in infant-baptising churches has been used by Mennonites and others in the believers' church tradition to add weight to the argument against infant baptism, and concomitantly against participation in communion by unbaptised children.⁸

Now, ironically, as infant-baptising churches are increasingly rejoining infant baptism and infant communion, Anabaptists are beginning to consider a separation of the sacraments from the other end (baptism for adults, communion for children).

Formerly, infant-baptising churches (other than the Orthodox) severed baptism and communion, beginning in the medieval period, and continuing with mainline reformers such as Calvin. This is so even though the earliest explicit reference to the practice of infant baptism (Tertullian, ca. 200–206, who opposed it) coincides roughly with the earliest explicit reference to infant communion (Cyprian, ca. 252–53, who promoted it). At first, infant-baptising churches naturally admitted infants to the Eucharist as soon as the practice of infant baptism started.⁹ And now, ironically, as infant-baptising churches are increasingly rejoining infant baptism and infant communion (reaching back to a practice

beginning in the third century), Anabaptists are beginning to consider a separation of the sacraments from the other end (baptism for adults, communion for children).

II

The question for Mennonites, then, is whether baptism and communion are necessarily tied together in relation to covenant membership in the church. The first explicit correlation between the two occurs in the *Didache*, a manual of church instruction and practice from the early part of the second century. There, baptism is articulated as the prerequisite for participation in the Eucharist

(9.5): “But let no one eat or drink of your Eucharist, except those who have been baptised in the Lord’s name.” In the earliest literature of the New Testament, the writings of Paul (ca. 50–56 C.E.), however, the close link between the two is already assumed. Accordingly, New Testament scholar Wayne Meeks, in his book

The question for Mennonites is whether baptism and communion are necessarily tied together in relation to covenant membership in the church.

The First Urban Christians, explicates baptism as “the ritual of initiation” and the Lord’s Supper as “the ritual of solidarity.”¹⁰ The tie between the two is clearest in 1 Cor. 10:1–4. There baptism and communion are presented as the main experiences of believers, in analogy to the Israelites going through the sea and eating manna: they “ate the same spiritual food and...drank the same spiritual drink [as Christians do],” that is, they ate and

drank “from Christ.” (Here, Paul’s language is most explicitly sacramental.) And 1 Cor. 10:17, 11:18, and 11:29 assume communion to be a ritual of the “one body,” the “gathered assembly.”

But the questions might yet properly be raised: what was the age of baptisands and communicants in the earliest period of the church, and were there exceptions to the usual tie between baptism and communion? The argument that even infants were baptised and thus included in communion from the earliest period is sometimes made on the basis of the analogy of Jewish proselyte baptism, the background for early Christian baptism. When a Gentile proselyte was admitted to the Jewish people, not only was that person baptised but also her or his family members, including dependants, children, and infants. Indeed, the New Testament gives evidence of household baptisms along these lines (Acts 10:44–48; 16:15, 32–34; 1 Cor. 1:16; 16:15). But the analogy breaks down, and does not provide sure evidence. Christian baptism was for both Jews and Gentiles, not exclusively for Gentiles as in Judaism; and babies later born to proselytes were not baptised, but were considered to be born “in holiness” as all Jewish children. In addition, Jewish proselyte baptism of children and infants was apparently less absolutely decisive for membership: baptised children of proselytes were not considered to have left the faith as apostates if they rejected the Jewish faith

as adults.¹¹ One can make an inference about the conceptual framework for baptising infants from the practice of baptism for the dead, a practice which Paul seems to have condoned (see 1 Cor. 15:29). The latter practice was apparently some kind of proxy baptism, with a rough parallel in later centuries in the requirement that infants to be baptised have a sponsor, while they themselves were passive in the process.

But Paul's language elsewhere seems to preclude the practice of baptism for infants and small children, although not explicitly. In Gal. 3:23–4:9, Paul presents a period of childhood immaturity and ignorance, when one is under the law and a guardian, in contrast to the time of "the coming of faith," when one is "baptised into Christ," a time of taking on adult responsibilities and privileges. While this imagery refers to the history of humankind, it also recapitulates the experience of individual believers, Gentiles in particular. In addition, Paul's Jewish framework would suggest that for him entry into the covenant community was formally not for infants or young children, but for those at a youthful age. Full membership in the covenant community at age 12 or 13 was associated with becoming a *bar mitzvah*, a fully responsible "son of the commandment." This rite of passage, not circumcision, properly constitutes the Jewish counterpart to Christian baptism.

Yet it is not clear how young children were when they were baptised in the earliest period of the church. The evidence from Justin Martyr (Rome, ca. 150–55 C.E.) is that some older believers attested to having become "disciples in early youth," implying early participation in baptism and the Lord's Supper, even as Justin makes it clear that baptism must be preceded by repentance and active faith.¹² In addition, Roman art of the third and later centuries, in catacombs and sarcophagi, usually depicts the baptismal candidate as a child (though in this period the church was also baptising infants).¹³

The further question is: how rigidly was baptism taken as a precondition to participation in communion? In my opinion, it is probable that this link was not adhered to in a rigid way in the earliest period of the church, for instance in the Pauline churches, for which we have the most (though meagre) evidence. The following arguments could be adduced. (1) The meals of ritual

participation with Messiah Jesus were likely not univocal in theme or framework, or in name;¹⁴ the evidence of the New Testament is for multiple symbolism surrounding the supper. That is, while the supper functioned *primarily* as a ritual of solidarity, that imagery was not the only one. (2) The ritual meal was not separated from but was an integral part of a community meal hosted in households, at which adults, children, and infants were present.¹⁵ (3) In the Jewish Passover, the most immediate parallel and framework for the Pauline practice of the supper, the community fully welcomed children, even a child who had not yet become a *bar mitzvah*. (4) Children in Paul's churches are addressed as morally responsible beings (Col. 3:20), which suggests that they were assumed to be part of the community in some significant way. (5) In continuity with his past before meeting Messiah Jesus, Paul considers children of believers (even those of only one believing parent) to be "holy" by virtue of their parent's faith (1 Cor. 7:14); Paul otherwise associates this term with full membership in the covenant community. (6) Paul's exclusionary

Paul's Jewish framework would suggest that for him full membership in the covenant community was associated with becoming a *bar mitzvah* at the age of 12 or 13. This rite of passage, not circumcision, properly constitutes the Jewish counterpart to Christian baptism.

language in reference to the supper applies only to activities (namely, pagan feasts in a temple [1 Cor. 8:10; 10:1–22]) incompatible with "partnering with the blood and body of Jesus," not to people who should be excluded from the supper.

Elsewhere the scriptural imagery of inclusiveness in the meal is most poignant in all four Gospel accounts of the Last Supper. There Jesus serves Judas with the explicit knowledge that he will become the betrayer. Furthermore, in 1 Cor. 11:27–29, Paul's comments about eating in an "unworthy manner" and about self-examination do not seek to clarify who can be included, or imply that the supper is only for the worthy. These comments, in fact, highlight the inclusive

character of the meal ("discerning the body"), in contrast to the usual, socially divisive way Corinthian patrons hosted meals. Typically, patrons wined and dined their business associates and other social equals, while relegating those of inferior status

(women, slaves, children) to the back rooms where the food was of lower quality and lesser quantity.¹⁶ To be sure, there is no hard evidence, pro or con, that unbaptised children were included in the ritual supper celebrations of the earliest church. What we have, essentially, is silence.

III

What paths, then, might Mennonites take in the new millennium? One path would maintain the traditional practice, reaffirmed by the 1995 *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, of tying baptism and communion closely to formal church membership and its adult responsibilities, and refraining from serving communion to unbaptised children and youth. The strength of this option is that baptism and communion continue to be closely linked, as expressions of formal church membership, with baptism usually taking place as a rite of passage into adult faith commitment. (I write in a context where baptism usually takes place around the time of high school graduation; among Mennonite groups this is probably at the upper end of the age spectrum for typical baptism of youth.) The weakness of this option is that baptism and communion are detached from the emergence of active faith, which often happens in much younger children.

A second path would be to baptise believers and welcome them to communion at a much younger age. The strengths and weaknesses are the reverse of those in the former path. The strength is that baptism and communion are linked to the emergence of active faith, while the weakness is the possible separation of both from formal church membership and responsibilities, usually articulated in terms of adult choices (historically including matters of life and death) and obligations (e.g., financial matters).

A third path would be to maintain a close link between baptism and formal, adult church membership, but to associate participation in communion with active or emerging faith, even for unbaptised children and youth. This would entail a careful rethinking of the meaning of communion, not reserving it for the worthy and the committed, but understanding it overtly as an

invitation of grace, a meal of welcome, mission, and hospitality. The weakness of this path is that the historical connection between baptism and communion is severed. The strength is that one church sacrament (communion) would acknowledge the emergence of faith and direction of choice, while the other (baptism) would be reserved for the rite of passage into formal, adult membership. This position assumes that communion need not bear the weight of Mennonite ecclesiology, but might foster a sense of mission and invitation.

A fourth path would be to let things go fuzzy: congregations would increasingly invite unbaptised children and youth to participate in communion without giving careful thought to the issues and the consequences. I cannot see any advantages to this alley. In this scenario, Mennonite ecclesiology—our understanding of the church as the visible body of those committed to Messiah Jesus—would collapse.

Silvie is content to wait for full participation in communion until she is baptised. But I will also welcome her participation in communion if she is invited to join in in ecumenical contexts, or if our church (or another Mennonite church) hosts a supper (say, as an occasional exception) that deliberately and plainly focuses on the inclusive imagery of the rite. For me the bottom line is that she grow to appreciate the meaning of faithful discipleship to Jesus in the context of a believing community and a world in need.

Notes

¹ “Supper with Jesus,” in *Jesus, Our Helper*, Jubilee Bible Story Book, Cycle A (Scottsdale: Herald Pr., 1994), 6–7; “Supper with Jesus,” in *Jesus, Our Teacher*, Jubilee Bible Story Book, Cycle B (Scottsdale: Herald Pr., 1995), 28–9.

² Ignatius *Letter to the Ephesians* 20.2.

³ Peter John Hobbs remarked to me earlier (e-mail correspondence, 23 November 2000): “My children do not know what it is not to receive communion. In fact, as I watch children come to communion week in and week out they do so with a sense of mystery, joy, wonder, and faith that I seldom see in adults.”

⁴ Laurence H. Stookey, *Eucharist: Christ's Feast with the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Pr., 1993), 135.

⁵ E.g., Geiko Müller-Fahrenholz, ed., —*And Do Not Hinder Them: An Ecumenical Plea for the Admission of Children to the Eucharist*, Faith and Order Paper 109 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982); Max Thurian, ed., *Churches Respond to BEM: Official Responses to the “Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry” Text*, vol. 5, Faith and Order Paper 143 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1988).

⁶ Peter John is also gravely aware, however, of the need for the continued nurture of faith and discipleship among the infants and children who take communion. For him

and other Anglicans, the Eucharist is not simply a sacramental feeding trough.

⁷ *Naming the Sheep: Understanding Church Membership* (Winnipeg: Resources Commission, Conference of Mennonites in Canada, 1997), 102–3.

⁸ E.g., Paul K. Jewett, *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 42–3, 193–207.

⁹ Explanations for why this changed in the medieval period point to (a) an increased interest in the rational components of faith adherence, thus the requirement of confirmation after catechetical instruction; and (b) a fear, based on a theology of transubstantiation, that infants and small children might crumble the host or slobber the blood. See Jewett, *Infant Baptism*, 195.

¹⁰ Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Pr., 1983), 150–62.

¹¹ See Jewett, *Infant Baptism*, 63–5.

¹² Justin Martyr *First Apology* 61, 65.

¹³ Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, 151.

¹⁴ The term “the Lord’s supper” occurs only once in Paul’s letters (1 Cor. 11:20), not so much as the title to the ritual, but as a clarification of the particular character of this church meal; see below. Paul also refers to the “table of the Lord” (1 Cor. 10:21), also not so much to give it a title, but to explicate its character, in contrast to rituals around pagan altars. On the diversity of early Christian practice, see Hans-Josef Klauck, “Lord’s Supper,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:362–72 .

¹⁵ E.g. Klauck, “Lord’s Supper,” 365; Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, 157–61.

¹⁶ On this background to Paul’s remarks, see Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, 159.