

The True History of Paedo-Communion

By Matthew Winzer

Upon reading the historiography of paedo-communion, as presented by adherents of the practice, one might receive the mistaken impression that paedo-communion was an uncontested observance from the days of the apostles until the height of the Popish supremacy in the dark ages, when the superstition of those times put an end to it. James Jordan's first thesis on the subject is, "Infants and small children participated in the Lord's Supper in the Western Church until the twelfth and thirteenth centuries."¹ Ray Sutton, likewise, asserts "that paedocommunion was practiced the first twelve centuries in the Western and Eastern churches."² Such a view of the subject, however, is only possible by embellishing certain facts, and omitting others.

In the following paper, a sincere endeavour has been made to bring the "true" history of paedo-communion to light. The historical writings of church fathers are examined in their theological and liturgical context, in order to demonstrate that paedo-communion was *not* a customary practice in the earliest ages of the church. More particularly, it shall be shown, that,

- (1.) There is no reference to paedo-communion until A.D. 251.
- (2.) Prior to that time, the fathers testify to the practice of discriminate communion.
- (3.) Even when paedo-communion is mentioned in 251, it is not described as a custom, nor is it claimed to be apostolic. It is referred to rather incidentally in the process of relating a series of events which fell under the judgement of God.
- (4.) It is not until 150 years later, in the fifth century in the west, that paedo-communion is specifically referred to as a practice—but that by this time, the communion-service was complex, including various categories of participation; and that the elements,

of which infants partook, were more than likely *not* a part of the ordinary communion service.

Such being the true history of paedo-communion, the claim which has been made by the advocates of this practice—that "infants and small children participated in the Lord's Supper in the Western Church until the twelfth and thirteenth centuries"—must be rejected as a false assertion.

1. THE FIRST REFERENCE TO INFANT COMMUNION IS A.D. 251

James Jordan, in order to validate his claim that infant communion was the practice of the Western Church *until* the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, quotes historical authorities such as Williston Walker and Joseph Bingham (Jordan, *Theses*, 1). The reference to Williston Walker, however, only reveals the assertion that considerations such as the real presence "led to the general abandonment of the practice of infant communion, which had been universal, and which continues in the Greek Church to the present."³ The fact that the practice *had been* universal *before* the twelfth century, hardly justifies Mr. Jordan's assertion that, in the Western Church, infants participated in communion *until* the twelfth century.

Moreover, Mr. Walker earlier commented that the practice was *first introduced* to the Western Church

THE AUTHOR: The Rev. Matthew Winzer is a minister of the Australian Free Church, currently serving in Rockhampton, Queensland, Australia. An earlier version of this article appeared in the online journal, *Credo Quarterly* in April 2003, which is no longer published.

1. James B. Jordan, "Theses on Paedocommunion," in *The Geneva Papers* (Tyler, Tex.: Geneva Divinity School, 1982) 1.
2. Ray R. Sutton, "Presuppositions of paedocommunion," *The Geneva Papers* (Tyler, Tex.: Geneva Divinity School, 1982) 4.
3. Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930) 274.

in the third century. After noting that Cyprian developed the doctrine “of the Lord’s Supper as a sacrifice offered to God by a priest,” he writes that “the sense of the life-giving quality of the Supper led, also, to the custom of infant-communion, of which Cyprian is a witness” (Walker, 99). Mr. Jordan’s first authority, therefore, fails to validate his claim that paedocommunion was a practice of the western church *until* the twelfth century. Mr. Walker explicitly states that the practice, which was abolished in the twelfth century, had a beginning in the third century. This dual fact had earlier led Samuel Miller to conclude, that “as miserable superstition brought it into the church, so a still more miserable superstition destroyed it.”⁴

Mr. Jordan’s second source of historical authority is the antiquary, Joseph Bingham. He says, that as the church baptised infants, “so she immediately admitted them to a participation of the eucharist, as soon as they were baptized, and ever after without exception.”⁵ But there is no claim made that the practice was observed in the western church *until* the twelfth century; let alone, as Ray Sutton would have his readers to believe, that Mr. Bingham “establishes that paedocommunion was practiced the first twelve centuries in the Western and Eastern churches” (Sutton, *Presuppositions*, 4). This is surely a burden grievous to be borne, especially when the antiquary was only concerned to point out that the practice is “mentioned” by “writers from the third to the fifth century.”

Christian Keidel is undoubtedly a little more circumspect than Messrs Jordan and Sutton, in presenting the evidence for the practice which he espouses; for he would only venture to say that it “was widespread in the early church.” To establish his case, he calls in eye-witnesses from both the eastern and western branches of the ancient church, and finds that references are more numerous in the western church: “The first known witness is Cyprian in 251,” he noted, “followed by Augustine of Hippo, Innocent I, Gelasius of Rome, and Gennadius of Marseilles.”⁶ Thence follow some references to particular church councils which approved the practice. Mr. Keidel is also prepared to

4. Samuel Miller, *Infant Baptism Scriptural and Reasonable* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, n.d.) 46.

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

6. Christian L. Keidel, “Is the Lord’s supper for children?” *Westminster Theological Journal* 37 (Spring, 1975) 301.

7. Paul K. Jewett, *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978) 42. Mr. Keidel, *Lord’s Supper*, 305 f.n., intimates the stimulus he received from Mr. Jewett’s syllabus, “Infant Baptism and Confirmation.”

acknowledge “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” (Keidel, 305).

Thus, the most that can be ascertained is that, “There is no reference to paedocommunion until A.D. 251.”

2. THE PRACTICE OF DISCRIMINATE COMMUNION PRIOR TO A.D. 251

Since Mr. Keidel acknowledges that the first witness to paedocommunion was Cyprian in 251, and that the practice was due in no small part to a wrong view of the sacrament, one might be surprised to learn that the paedocommunion apologist does not conclude that the practice owed its existence to a corruption in doctrine. He simply counter-argues that

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 (Keidel, 305).

The anti-paedobaptist apologist, Paul Jewett, expressed fairly much the same position with regards to the verdict of church history; although he obviously passed a very different sentence in the light of that verdict. He believes that

the initial evidence for infant baptism and infant communion shows a proximity in time (A.D. 205–250) and place (North Africa) which makes it difficult to see why the former usage should be accepted while the latter is rejected.⁷

But this attempt to interpret church history as giving equal plausibility to both infant baptism and infant communion, will not bear up under scrutiny. There is evidence from the second century of the church, prior to Tertullian’s explicit reference in 205, which can only be interpreted in the light of infant baptism; and there is nothing in the early fathers to contradict it. On the other hand, the fathers of the second century teach a doctrine of the Eucharist which discriminates against undiscerning participation.

The first witness to infant baptism is Justin Martyr, in his Apology to the emperor Antoninus Pius (138–161). He refers to many men and women of sixty and

seventy years of age, from every race of men, who had been Christ's disciples from childhood [*ek paidon*].⁸ This indicates that infant discipleship was a norm of Christian society, and that it included many who, like Polycarp, had served Christ for the duration of their lives. Not long after Justin, Irenæus of Lyons (120–202) wrote that Jesus “came to save all through means of Himself—all, I say, who through Him are born again to God—infants, and children, and boys, and youths, and old men” (Irenæus, “Against Heresies,” *ANF* 1:391). One is born again, according to the fathers, by means of baptism.

Thus the second century gives strong support in favour of paedobaptism. It also speaks unequivocally on behalf of discriminate communion. In his description of Eucharistic celebration, Justin states in no uncertain terms that no one is allowed to partake of the Lord's supper, but he who is qualified by a profession of the church's faith and a corresponding life of obedience; and he bases this upon the fact that the Eucharist ought not to be received as common bread and common drink. He wrote:

And this food is called among us *Eukaristia* [the Eucharist], of which no one is allowed to partake but the man who believes that the things which we teach are true, and who has been washed with the washing that is for the remission of sins, and unto regeneration, and who is so living as Christ has enjoined. For not as common bread and common drink do we receive these ... (Justin, *ANF* 1:185).

The assertion that “no one is allowed to partake but...,” means that what follows are the *only* qualifications by which *anybody* might be admitted to the Eucharist. These qualifications, besides baptism, were a profession of the church's faith and a life conformable to Christ's commandments; or as would be stated in modern terms, a credible profession of faith. Without these qualifications, Justin says, no one is allowed to partake; and that would include undiscerning infants.

Irenæus, likewise, gave in his testimony as to how the early Christians celebrated the Eucharist. It was not carnal, but in spirit and in truth:

And therefore the oblation of the Eucharist is not a carnal one, but a spiritual; and in this respect it is pure. For we make an oblation to God of the bread and the cup of blessing, giving Him thanks in that He has commanded the earth to bring forth these fruits for our nourishment. And then, when we have perfected the

oblation, we invoke the Holy Spirit, that He may exhibit this sacrifice, both the bread the body of Christ, and the cup the blood of Christ, in order that the receivers of these antitypes may obtain remission of sins and life eternal. Those persons, then, who perform these oblations in remembrance of the Lord, do not fall in with Jewish views, but, performing the service after a spiritual manner, they shall be called sons of wisdom (Irenæus, *ANF* 1:574, 575).

In other words, the Eucharist was celebrated with the participant giving thanks and praying for the Lord's blessing upon their receiving of the elements. Such a participation, because performed in remembrance of the Lord, is classified as spiritual; and where this is wanting, the implication is that the partaker is worshipping the Lord after the carnal manner of the Jews.

A little later still, Clement of Alexandria, in the *Instructor*, states that the Eucharist is “renowned and glorious grace; and they who by faith partake of it are sanctified both in body and soul” (Clement of Alexandria, “The Instructor,” *ANF* 2:242). Believing participation, therefore, is seen to be necessary in order for one to be profited by the sacrament. Then, in his preface to the *Stromata* (about the turn of the century), Clement gives this testimony on behalf of discriminate communion:

some in the dispensation of the Eucharist, according to custom enjoin that each one of the people individually should take his part. One's own conscience is best for choosing accurately or shunning. And its firm foundation is a right life, with suitable instruction. But the imitation of those who have already been proved, and who have led correct lives, is most excellent for the understanding and practice of the commandments. “So that whosoever shall eat the bread and drink the cup of the Lord unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup (Clement of Alexandria, “Stromata,” *ANF* 2:300).

The following is to be observed from the father's words: (a.) That each individual has the responsibility to choose or to shun the Eucharist. (b.) That it is only by the testimony of an individual's conscience that such a determination can be made. (c.) That a right life and suitable knowledge is foundational for participation in

8. Justin Martyr, “The First Apology of Justin,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* 1 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993 rpt.) 167. Hereafter abbreviated *ANF*.

the Eucharist. (d.) That all of this is according to custom. (e.) And this is in accord with Paul's words to the Corinthians, which requires self-examination.

These are the writings of the fathers up to the turn of the third century. There is undoubtedly a great weight of evidence *for* paedobaptism, and an even greater weight of evidence *against* paedocommunion. So the testimony of church history certainly does not suggest that infant baptism and infant communion are equally plausible. Church history provides, very early, non-conflicting testimony in behalf of the practice of baptising infants; while the same history indicates a practice which was contrary to admitting infants to participate in eucharistic celebration. In this light, the first reference to paedocommunion in 251, must be seen as an innovation which was due in no small part to changing beliefs concerning the nature of the eucharist.

3. AN EXAMINATION OF THE A.D. 251 REFERENCE TO PÆDO-COMMUNION

Coming into the third century, the evidence for paedobaptism naturally increases with the greater proliferation of Christian writings. The African Tertullian, the Roman Hippolytus, and the Alexandrian Origen, all give explicit testimony to the practice of it. Hippolytus and Origen expressly claim that it is derived from the apostles. Moreover, the catacombs, which begin to emerge at this time, bear inscriptions which speak of infants from the youngest age having received baptism. Then, in the middle of the third century, a church council of sixty-six members decreed that the baptism of infants was not to be delayed, when one raised the question as to whether it should be put off until the eighth day in accordance with Old Testament law; so ingrained was the practice of infant baptism in the very fabric of the church.⁹

Now, if this mountain of evidence on behalf of paedobaptism is compared with the molehill that is put forward for paedocommunion, it will become apparent that the first reference to paedocommunion cannot be regarded as a historical testimony which established the practice as "widespread" or "accepted." There is but

9. See Tertullian, "On Baptism," chap. 18, in *ANF* 3:678. Hippolytus is quoted by Paul Jewett, *Infant Baptism*, p. 23; and Origen is quoted in Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* 2 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994 rpt.) 260. For information on the inscriptions which have been found among the catacombs, see Everett Ferguson, "Inscriptions and the Origin of Infant Baptism," *Journal of Theological Studies* 30 (1979) 37-46. The decision of the Church Council is recorded in Cyprian, "Epistle LVIII," in *ANF* 5:353, 354.

one reference to paedocommunion, and that is very obscure, in A.D. 251. This reference nowhere condones the practice; neither does it describe paedocommunion as a custom or claim that it was received from the apostles. Moreover, the next reference to paedocommunion, after 251, is brought forward from the writings of Augustine, which are dated 150 years later. This makes it clear that the reference in question is an isolated incident, which has no concurring testimony from any other writing of the period. These facts shall be brought out in the following examination of the first reference to paedocommunion.

After the heady days of persecution under Decius, when peace was restored to the Church in 251, Cyprian took up his pen to write *On the Lapsed*. He begins with describing the blessed peace which the church now enjoys, warning against any who would "detract from the uncorrupted steadfastness of those who have stood." Upon which, he duly noted that a corruption in discipline had brought the Lord's chastening hand upon them; and in describing the faithlessness of the former days, he writes, "among the priests there was no devotedness of religion; among the ministers there was no sound faith: in their works there was no mercy; in their manners there was no discipline" (Cyprian, "Treatises," in *ANF* 5:438).

So it must be noted, in the first place, that Cyprian is describing a declining state of the church, which was failing to implement the discipline of the Lord upon its members. At this point, the author begins to denounce those who had failed to stand firm against the late persecution: they forsook the assemblies of the saints and gave themselves to the sacrifice of idols. Cyprian particularly marked out for rebuke those parents who removed their children from the means of grace. And in order to give greater force to his condemnation of this practice, he places the charge of the parents on the lips of their very own children:

And that nothing might be wanting to aggravate the crime, infants also, in the arms of their parents, either carried or conducted, lost, while yet little ones, what in the very first beginning of their nativity they had gained. Will not they, when the day of judgment comes, say, "We have done nothing; nor have we forsaken the Lord's bread and cup to hasten freely to a profane contact; the faithlessness of others has ruined us. We have found our parents our murderers; they have denied to us the Church as a Mother; they have denied God as a Father: so that, while we were little, and unforeseeing, and unconscious of such a crime, we were associated by

others to the partnership of wickedness, and we were snared by the deceit of others (Cyprian, 5.439)?

Paedo-communion historian, Tommy Lee, after quoting this section of Cyprian's work, without any regard to the context of the words, draws this unwarranted conclusion: "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."¹⁰

It is gratuitous to assume that a *personal* participation in the sacrament is expressed by the words, "nor have we forsaken the Lord's bread and cup." For by this time, the communion service had become the central part of the church's worship, and the Christian gatherings are often referred to under the metaphor of "the sacrifice" or some such symbol relative to the communion. So that the thought which Cyprian expresses by the mouths of the infants is that they had "not forsaken the assembling of themselves together." The parents had taken them from the fellowship of the church, and brought them instead into "a profane contact." This is further verified when it is noted that the infants go on to say: "they have denied to us the Church as a Mother." Thus Cyprian was only alluding to the parents removing them from the gathering together of the church, not from physical participation in the communion.

The church father, after noting this unfaithful desertion of the church, went on to describe an even greater tragedy. With peace restored, he complains that the lapsed are too quickly received back into church-fellowship. This is "a new kind of devastation," which brings about "under the title of mercy, a deceiving mischief and a fair-seeming calamity. Contrary to the vigour of the Gospel, contrary to the law of the Lord and God, by the temerity of some, communion is relaxed to heedless persons." This is but another persecution of God's people, the author complains.

Here it must be noted, in the second place, that discipline concerning admission to the sacrament of communion, was relaxed after the persecution had ceased. Thereupon he begins to expostulate with his readers that only God can forgive sins, and that until there is true confession on the part of the lapsed, the wrath of God abides upon them. In which context he begins to relate a few incidents which describe the purging fire of the Lord. "Lo, what punishments do we behold of those who have denied! what sad deaths of theirs do we bewail!" "Some are punished in the meantime," he says, "that others may be corrected. The torments of a few are the examples of all" (Cyprian, ANF 5:443).

It is imperative to observe, in the third place, that Cyprian has begun to show that God's judgement rests upon this indiscriminate communion which allows anybody to partake of the supper. In this context, he relates some incidents in which indiscriminate communicants were punished by the Lord for their sin. Concerning one of these incidents, Cyprian would have his readers to "learn what occurred when I myself was present and a witness." He then proceeds to refer to an occasion when an infant received one of the elements of the Lord's supper. If the context is observed, it will become blatantly obvious that Cyprian was far from condoning the practice of infant-communion. The event is thus described:

A child, who had been deserted when her parents fled persecution, was force-fed bread mingled with wine in the presence of an idol. Later, the mother recovered the child, but was ignorant of what had happened to her. When the girl was brought into the worship-service of the church, she showed signs of impatience. At last, the sacramental wine was offered by the deacon to those present, says Cyprian,

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 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 (Cyprian, 5.444).

The story passes judgement upon itself, which is what the author intended it to do. The following points need to be observed:

(a.) This is an isolated reference to a child being given one element of the communion, and it fails to give the impression that it was a custom in the church. So far was Cyprian from indicating that it was received by tradition from the apostles, that he was in the process of deprecating the corruption of discipline in the church which had led to the practice of indiscriminate communion.

(b.) Contrary to Mr. Jewett, the context makes it clear that the author *does* scruple at the practice, for the incident is related as an example of the judgement of God

10. Tommy Lee, *The History of Paedocommunion: From the Early Church until 1500* (online document, at http://www.reformed.org/sacramentology/tl_paedo.html) 6.

upon “heedless persons.” These punishments, he had stated, were for the purpose that others might be corrected. In other words, this story of infant participation in communion, is not provided as a custom to be imitated, but as an example to be shunned, that others might not be punished in a similar way.

(c.) Cyprian was so far from thinking that the infant ought to have been a partaker of communion, that he interpreted the little child turning away her face from the wine as being inspired “by the instinct of the divine majesty.” It was a maxim of his, “That the Eucharist is to be received with fear and honour,” and he quotes Paul’s warning against unworthy participation in support of this (Cyprian, 5.554). This incident of infant communion, which displays his disgust at the relaxed standard of eucharistic discipline in his time, suffices as an exposition of this maxim.

(d.) He does not describe paedocommunion, but the *force-feeding* of a child with one of the elements of the communion; a practice which Christian Keidel opposes (Keidel, 305–306).

(e.) One does well to notice the practice of the heathen in forcing the food of idols down the throats of Christian infants, for the purpose of gaining them to their superstitions. As Cyprian had earlier complained of the ministers indiscriminately giving communion to the lapsed in order to reclaim them, this incident of forcing the Eucharist upon an infant who had fallen into the hands of the heathen, may well have been derived from the heathen.

(f.) Subsequent examples related by Cyprian indicate that he was speaking of what ought *not* to be. The next paragraph goes on to speak of “the woman who in advanced life and more mature age secretly crept in among us when we were sacrificing, received not food, but a sword for herself; and as if taking some deadly poison into her jaws and body, began presently to be tortured ...” Anybody with an ounce of discretion can see that the church father did not approve of their participation in the Lord’s supper.

Now, let the reader compare this passing, incidental reference to force-feeding a little girl the wine of the communion, to the indisputable mass of evidence for paedobaptism from the writings of Justin, Irenæus, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Origen, Cyprian and the catacombs. Let it be noted that these witnesses indicate widespread support, apostolic claim, and conciliar favour for paedocommunion just a hundred to a hundred and fifty years after the close of the apostolic era. On the other hand, Cyprian’s isolated reference to what is erroneously called paedocommunion is far from favourable, it contradicts the practice of discriminate communion avowed in the previous century, and there is not another alleged witness in the west for another one hundred and fifty years. A fair and impartial examiner of this evidence will undoubtedly conclude that the history of the third century church does not give any plausibility to the idea that paedocommunion was widespread or accepted practice.

4. AUGUSTINE’S SO-CALLED “ACCIDENTAL” REFERENCES TO PÆDO-COMMUNION

Christian Keidel’s next western witness, after Cyprian, is Augustine of Hippo. Tommy Lee calls this father’s espousal of infant communion, an “indirect, ‘accidental’ reference to it” (Tommy Lee, *History*, 8). The basis of alleging Augustine in favour of paedocommunion is his theology of the sacraments. This needs to be borne in mind, for Augustine never explicitly affirms that infants frequently took their place at the Lord’s table and participated with the rest of the congregation in the sacramental body and blood of the Lord.

In his anti-Pelagian work on forgiveness of sins and baptism of infants, the onus of Augustine’s argument was to prove that, because infants are baptised, they must have original sin to wash away. In the course of this argument, he paused to answer the allegation of those who taught that infants are not baptised for the remission of sins, but only in order to obtain the kingdom of heaven (chap. 23). He considered it an established principle (chaps. 24, 25) that infants are saved as sinners through baptism.

Hereupon (chap. 26) Augustine argued from the words of the Lord in John 6:53, where it is stated, “Except ye eat my flesh and drink my blood, ye shall have no *life* in you.” He interpreted this as symbolising the Lord’s table, “to which,” he insisted, “none but a baptized person has a right to approach.”¹¹ He then proceeded to argue (chap. 27), “that even for the life of infants was His flesh given, which He gave for the life of the world; and that even they will not have life if they eat not the flesh of the Son of man” (Ibid.). Later still (chap. 34), the doctor drove this point home: “If, therefore, as so many and such divine witnesses agree, neither salvation nor eternal life can be hoped for by any man without baptism and the Lord’s body and blood, it is vain to promise these blessings to infants without them” (Ibid. 28).

11. Augustine, “On Forgiveness of Sins and Baptism,” in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* first series 5 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991 rpt.) 25. Hereafter abbreviated *NPNF1*.

Augustine is silent as to the immediate necessity for infants to be brought to the Lord's table to participate in Christ's body and blood. At this point, his sacramental theology *might* entail nothing more than that infants will need to commune at some point in their lives in order to receive eternal life. It could *possibly* suggest that infants were to be given a drop of the wine when they were baptised, or when they were approaching death. *Perhaps* it refers to the practice of allowing non-communicants to eat the remains of the bread.

The most explicit statements which Augustine made regarding the relation of infants to the communion, are in these words: "This reconciliation is in the laver of regeneration and in the flesh and blood of Christ, without which not even infants can have life in themselves."¹² "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."¹³

These statements only demonstrate that Augustine thought it was necessary for infants to partake of the sacramental body and blood of Christ; they nowhere state *when* or *how* they participated. Was it when they were baptised, or upon their death-bed? Was it once, or frequently? Augustine does not answer these questions.

Despite the fact that Augustine's references to infant communion are "accidental," paedo-communion historians insist that this is what the father had in mind when he urged the necessity for infants to feed on Christ in the sacrament. Their inference, however, is only valid if one considers Augustine's words in the light of a modern communion service. When the paedo-communion advocate reads the church father's thoughts, he supposes that the post-Constantine church observed the sacrament in the simplistic manner in which it is done today in many Protestant churches. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

Eucharistic celebration had become very complicated by Augustine's time, and included different categories of participation. The various uses of the bread may suffice to demonstrate this point. For example, the name *viaticum* was applied to the Eucharist which was given to the dying. Canon 13 of the Council of Nicea (A.D. 325) speaks "concerning the departing," that

if any man be at the point of death, he must not be deprived of the last and most indispensable Viaticum. But if any one should be restored to health again who has received the communion when his life was despaired of, let him remain among those who communicate in prayers only.¹⁴

This Canon indicates that by the first quarter of the fourth century, there were two categories of participation in the Eucharist. There were those who ordinarily participated in the service of the Mass; and there were non-communicants who would only join in with the prayers of the Mass, but who could receive the Eucharist if they were despairing of life. Here, then, is a concrete example of the church holding to the necessity of receiving the communion elements for eternal life; and yet, it clearly does not entail that the recipient must receive these elements in the communion service. In fact, according to this canon, one can receive the elements in times of necessity, and still not be regarded as a communicant.

Besides the different categories of communicants, there were also different kinds of communion-bread. In the Greek church, around the fourth century, only a square piece of the loaf intended for communion was consecrated. The unconsecrated *remainder*, known by the Greek name of *antidora*, was cut into small pieces and placed on or near the altar during the Mass. This *antidora* would subsequently be distributed to *non-communicants*.¹⁵ The historian, Evagrius Scholasticus of the sixth century, referred to an old custom which involved the giving of remainders of the bread to young school-boys:

It is an old custom in the imperial city, that, when there remains over a considerable quantity of the holy fragments of the immaculate body of Christ our God, boys of tender age should be fetched from among those who attend the schools, to eat them.¹⁶

Whether Evagrius was speaking specifically of the *antidora* is hard to determine. What is certain is that he describes a type of infant participation in the communion which was outside of the eucharistic service; and it was this *extraneous* communion, in the *remainder* of the holy portions, which the school-boys partook of.

12. Augustine, "Against Two Letters of the Pelagians," *NPNF1*, 5:420.

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

14. "The Seven Ecumenical Councils," ed. Henry R. Percival, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* second series 14 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991 rpt.) 29. Hereafter abbreviated *NPNF2*.

15. See the editorial notes in "The Seven Ecumenical Councils," *NPNF2*, 14:132.

16. Evagrius Scholasticus, *A History of the Church in Six Books* (London: Samuel Bagster and Sons, 1846) 235.

Besides the *antidora*, there was another part of the bread known as *eulogiae*. This was bread which had been blessed, but not consumed in the Mass. The *eulogiae* was sometimes used by the clergy to send to one another as tokens of fellowship. It was also utilised by the faithful when they were hindered from attending the service. Basil mentions that even when they had attended the service, the bread having been blessed by the priest, the faithful would take it home and feed upon it daily:

And at Alexandria and in Egypt, each one of the laity, for the most part, keeps the communion, at his own house, and participates in it when he likes. For when once the priest has completed the offering, and given it, the recipient, participating in it each time as entire, is bound to believe that he properly takes and receives it from the giver.¹⁷

In the light of this evidence, it is quite obviously too simplistic to suggest that references to the necessity of infant participation in the communion elements must imply the practice of paedocommunion. The implication is only valid if one considers that these extraneous participations in the remainder of the elements is worthy of the name *communion* in the biblical sense. For it is impossible to prove, from the writings of Augustine or any of the post-Nicene church fathers, that they considered infant participation *in the communion service* as essential for eternal life.

Furthermore, three historical facts tend to disprove the hypothesis that the post-Nicene fathers expected infants to participate in the communion service in order to be nourished unto eternal life. First, baptismal postponement was a widespread problem at that time. Second, the fathers placed great emphasis upon catechesis in order to prepare the subject for the worthy reception of the sacraments. Third, they thought that understanding of the sacrament was requisite to a worthy receiving of it.

(1.) As to the postponement of baptism, historians are generally agreed. Philip Schaff states:

Many Christian parents postponed the baptism of their children, sometimes from indifference, sometimes from fear that they might by their later life forfeit the grace of

baptism, and thereby make their condition the worse. Thus Gregory Nazianzen and Augustine, though they had eminently pious mothers, were not baptized till their conversion in their manhood (*History* 3:483).

The suggestion that infants customarily participated with their parents in the communion service contradicts the very well known fact that there were multitudes of infants who had not even been baptised; bearing in mind, of course, that no unbaptised person was permitted to communicate with the faithful.

(2.) With regard to the emphasis upon catechesis, the writings of the fathers abound. There were both pre- and post-baptismal catechumens in preparation for the worthy receiving of the sacraments. Augustine refers to this preparative course when he writes:

What, moreover, is all that time for, during which they hold the name and place of catechumens, except to hear what the faith and pattern of Christian life should be, so that first they may prove themselves and then eat of the Bread of the Lord and drink of the Chalice.¹⁸

The importance which the fathers placed upon learning the Christian faith, and proving oneself ready to live the Christian life, as necessary preparatives to sacramental participation, is another strong argument against the hypothesis that the fathers' view of the Lord's supper implies the practice of paedocommunion.

(3.) As to the understanding which the fathers required of the recipient of the sacrament, there can be no doubt. The eucharistic liturgy constantly called upon the communicant to examine themselves and discern the Lord's body and blood in the elements.

Cyril of Jerusalem's Catechetical Lectures provides the catechumen with a description of the eucharistic liturgy which had been adopted in the church of that time. The Catechist often stops to reflect on different aspects of the liturgy, drawing attention to its continual call for the individual to partake worthily. At one point, the priest is quoted as saying, "Holy things to holy men," indicating that only those who are sanctified ought to participate in the consecrated elements. Cyril then describes what this holiness consists in: "we too are holy, but not by nature, only by participation, and discipline, and prayer."¹⁹

Moreover, in the act of receiving the elements, the Catechist regarded spiritual discernment and faith to feed upon Christ as essential. "Trust not the judgment to thy bodily palate," writes Cyril, "no, but to faith unflinching; for they who taste are bidden to taste,

17. Basil, "Letter XCIII," in *NPNF2*, 8:179.

18. *De bapt.* 19, 1–2. As quoted by Rev. Michele Dujarier, *A History of the Catechumenate: the First Six Centuries* (online at <http://www.cyberfaith.com/examining/historyof2-12.html>).

19. Cyril of Jerusalem, "Lecture XXIII," in *NPNF2*, 7:156.

not bread and wine, but the anti-typical Body and Blood of Christ" (Cyril of Jerusalem, 7:156). Faith, understanding and appreciating the nature and significance of the sacramental elements, was regarded by the fathers as essential to the worthy receiving of the sacrament.

This emphasis which the liturgy placed upon a subjective participation in the sacrament, was based upon the fathers' interpretation of what Paul required of the Corinthians when they celebrated the Lord's supper. Augustine called upon his hearers to

Bear in mind the meaning of the Scripture, "Whosoever shall eat the bread or drink the cup of the Lord unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord." And when the apostle said this, he was dealing with those who were taking the body of the Lord, like any other food, in an undiscerning and careless spirit. If, then, he is thus taken to task who does not discern, that is, does not distinguish from the other kinds of food, the body of the Lord, what condemnation must be his, who in the guise of a friend comes as an enemy to His table!²⁰

In another context, Augustine exhorted his hearers as follows: "Let them who already eat the Flesh of the Lord and drink His blood, think What it is they eat and drink, lest, as the Apostle says, 'They eat and drink judgment to themselves.'"²¹

For Augustine, knowledge of the meaning of the communion elements was essential to worthy participation. To partake of the elements carelessly, as if they were common food, was to fall under the verdict of the apostle who regarded such unworthy participation as incurring the guilt of the body and blood of the Lord. The communicant was to have a cognitive understanding of what the elements represented.

This interpretation of Paul's words was not confined to the Western fathers, who are sometimes accused of indulging in rationalism. The eastern fathers read the apostle Paul in the same way; and they, speaking the Greek language natively, were in a prime position to grasp the meaning of the apostle. John Chrysostom, in his homily on Paul's words, declared:

But why doth he eat judgment to himself? "Not discerning the Lord's body:" i.e., not searching, not bearing in mind, as he ought, the greatness of the things set before him; not estimating the weight of the gift. For if thou shouldst come to know accurately Who it is that lies

before thee, and Who He is that gives Himself, and to whom, thou wilt need no other argument, but this is enough for thee to use all vigilance; unless thou shouldst be altogether fallen.²²

Here, again, emphasis is placed upon understanding the content of the communion. This patristic interpretation of Paul's words is considered by paedo-communion proponents as being too rationalistic. James Jordan, for example, states, "the intellectualistic interpretation of this verse has it that 'discerning the body' means *understanding* ..." The problem Paul was addressing, he suggests, pertained to the Corinthians' failure to acknowledge the body of the church, not the spiritual presence of Christ in the sacrament: "the problem is moral, not intellectual." This leads him to conclude that "there is nothing in this passage to justify the notion that children must not be admitted to Lord's table until they are 'old enough to understand'" (Jordan, *Theses*, 3).

Leaving aside the question as to the correct interpretation of Paul's words, the point which is pertinent to an historical study of this kind is, that the church fathers, long before the advent of rationalism, understood Paul to be speaking of an intellectual pre-requisite to communion. To be sure, it was not a natural understanding which they considered to be necessary; for that would only lead to the conclusion that the elements were merely physical. Rather, they insisted that the communicant must have a believing understanding that Christ is spiritually present in the elements; and that in feeding upon the elements, the participant was spiritually feeding upon Christ and His redemptive benefits.

Accordingly, the patristic interpretation of Paul's words *does* justify the notion that children need to be "old enough to understand" before they are admitted to the Lord's table. As the paedo-communion apologist implied, the debarring of infants from the Lord's table is a practical consequence of believing that Paul required intellectual discernment for worthy participation. It has been shown that this is exactly how the fathers interpreted Paul. The consequence, therefore, must be that their view of the sacrament excludes infants from communion.

20. Augustine, "Tractates on the Gospel according to St. John," *NPNF1*, 7:313.

21. Augustine, "Sermons on Selected Lessons of the New Testament," *NPNF1*, 6:504.

22. John Chrysostom, "Homily XXVIII" on First Corinthians, in *NPNF1* 12:164.

Now these three historical facts—widespread baptismal postponement, the necessity of catechesis, and the insistence upon a spiritual understanding of the sacrament—when taken together, make it very difficult to believe that these fathers expected infants to participate in the communion service. It is true that, by Augustine’s time, it was regarded as absolutely necessary to eat the flesh and drink the blood of Christ in order to receive eternal life. It is also indisputably the case that, by the end of the fifth century, the Eucharist was customarily given to infants; for Gelasius I. of Rome (A.D. 495) ordered: “No one should venture to exclude any child from this sacrament, without which no one can attain to eternal life.”²³ It is an uncontested fact, however, that the church had made provision for the elements to be administered to non-communicants outside of the communion service; and that participation in these elements did not constitute the recipient a regular communicant.

Given the fact that Augustine’s view of the necessary nature of the sacramental elements does not entail the admission of infants to the sacrament itself, the father cannot be regarded as providing even “accidental” references to paedocommunion. Augustine, then, may not be enlisted as a witness on behalf of those who attempt to prove that infant-inclusion in the celebration of communion was widespread in the early church. This is fatal to the historical claims of paedocommunion proponents; for it effectively means that there is not one witness to paedocommunion in the first five centuries of the church.

CONCLUSION

The historical record of the early church has been examined down to the fifth century. There is not one piece of evidence, amidst the voluminous writings of the fathers, to suggest that infants participated in the church’s celebration of the Lord’s supper. The first known record, which is regarded as alluding to the practice, dates from A.D. 251. Prior to that time, however, Justin explicitly testified to the fact that no one, without a credible profession of faith, was permitted to join with the faithful in the celebration of the supper.

When paedocommunion was first mentioned in 251, by Cyprian, it was in the context of condemning a relaxed standard which indiscriminately admitted the

unworthy to the sacrament. Cyprian did not describe the incident as if it were customary or apostolic. To the contrary, he regarded what happened as suffering the vengeance of God, and he gave every appearance of condemning it. Moreover, there is not another reference to infants receiving the sacramental elements for another one hundred and fifty years. So there is no basis for concluding that Cyprian’s incident was indicative of a general church practice.

Finally, when there is an insistence, based upon a changing theology of the sacraments, that infants must partake of the eucharistic elements, there is still no clear evidence to suggest that this participation must take place at the church’s communion service. For with the theological change, there came also a liturgical alteration, making way for non-communicant participation in the elements during periods of illness. And when this is seen in the context of a popular trend to postpone baptism, an ecclesiastical insistence on catechesis to prepare for the sacraments, and a theological position which stressed the importance of a spiritual understanding of the sacrament, it becomes more likely that infants did not take part in the communion service.

When exactly paedocommunion did emerge as a church practice, and under what auspices, is difficult to ascertain. From the custom of giving infants the surplus of the communion elements, it is not difficult to see how they may have eventually been permitted to participate in the celebration of the Mass itself, and to take their place with adult communicants at the altar. From about the fifth century onward, as the church made substantial inroads into non-Roman parts of the world, many ecclesiastical customs were adapted to suit the preferences of new cultures. There is a distinct possibility that infant-communion may have arisen at that time. But be that as it may, one fact is certain: there is no basis for the practice of paedocommunion in the patristic writings. ■

23. Quoted by John McClintock and James Strong eds., *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological and Ecclesiastical Literature* 4 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1981 rpt.), 576.