

## Children and the Lord's Supper

### *Children and the Lord's Supper*

Conversations about children and the Lord's Supper often open up a number of views. For some it is a simple matter of inclusion and for others it is a matter of intellect. Underlying these different views is both a way of seeing the child and a vision of what gathering at the table means.

We bring to these conversations, not always explicitly, a theology of children and a theology of the Lord's Supper. In addition, what is often left out of conversations around children and Communion is baptism, largely because we no longer expect baptism to be necessary for a person to share in bread and wine. I suggest we must ask what is the relationship between the Lord's Supper and baptism, with regard to whoever is welcome at the table.

The view that this is a simple matter of inclusion reflects the fact that being inclusive has become a central value in our society, something most people can agree is a 'good'. We judge institutions on the basis of how inclusive they are. This is mirrored in lots of ways, as might be expected, in the Church, particularly for Baptists in the Baptist Union of Great Britain, being an inclusive community is one of the Five Core Values.

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Being inclusive is seen as good, and the alternative is considered negatively, a matter of fairness and equality. To exclude children from sharing in bread and wine is unfair, a form of discrimination. Theologically, the argument runs that Jesus welcomed children to come to him and Jesus' own table practice was radically inclusive, so who are we to fence the table from them? Children are part of God's kingdom and the breaking of bread is an act of grace offered to all.

This perhaps also reflects both the fact that children are now much more included in worship – their participation is something we take into consideration a lot more – and that the Lord's Supper, while still done in general only monthly in Baptist churches, is understood as a central part of worship. It is not an add-on and, as such, children are now more likely to be present when it is celebrated.

We might want to critically ask whether our desire to include children at the table also reflects the pressure to idolise children and treat them as mini-adults, where the boundaries of childhood get blurred. The language with children of 'no' or 'wait' becomes difficult to speak as children are pressured into making choices, especially by a market which views them as potential consumers. When everything revolves around children and keeping them happy, we are more likely to argue for their inclusion.

The strength of this view is to acknowledge that the gospel is for all: God's welcome extends to everyone. The weakness is perhaps the danger that we lose a sense that the body and blood of Christ is for those who are his body, the fellowship of believers.



The view that inclusion in Communion is a matter of intellect speaks to a view that participation at the Lord's Supper requires a measure of understanding about what is happening. At its most extreme, children are viewed as not having the intellect to understand; they do not know what it means 'to do this in memory of me'. Theologically this stresses that the table is about our ability to respond: participation demands that we fully know what we are participating in. The table, in this understanding, must be fenced from those who cannot 'discern the body' or 'examine themselves' as to do so may mean they eat and drink unworthily, with the consequence of judgement. The child is viewed as a 'blank slate' or an 'empty vessel' who has not yet been given the knowledge.

We might want to critically ask how much understanding is required, especially when the invitation to the table is expressed as something like to those 'who love Jesus' (which I do think is in danger of being a little meaningless itself – what do we mean by 'love' and who is this 'Jesus' that we are asking 'do you love?') We might ask if any of us have enough understanding of the meaning of this Supper? Are not most of us in danger of not being able properly to 'discern the body'? The strength of this view is to emphasise that we should not want to trivialise the table, the weakness is to make participation a measure of intellect. "Which of you are wise?" asks Paul to the church in Corinth, and the disciples frequently didn't understand Jesus. We should also question the view of the child here, which largely sees them as passive and not as 'active learners'.

Of the many different things that happen in church, the Lord's Supper, with the simplicity of its words and its visible actions of taking, blessing, breaking and sharing, might be one of the things that is most accessible to children.

### **Elementary: a practical response**

I am four years into being a minister of a local church. When I arrived we celebrated the Lord's Supper once a month at a morning service, and the children were almost always present. They did not receive bread and wine, but a practice had evolved where the children received a promise of Scripture on paper.

Over about a year, using the Baptist Union's book *Gathering around the Table*, as church members we explored our understanding of the Lord's Supper and the potential participation of children. The church ended up moving to celebrate the Lord's Supper twice a month in the morning, once as part of all-age worship, and once without the children, allowing the sacrament to take different forms. I was given permission to 'play' with the logistics of how we conducted the meal. In our

all-age Communion, the liturgy around the table is more participatory and is written with all ages in mind. We have, for example, used questions and answers and the prayer of thanksgiving has been done with sign-language, so the meal has a teaching element to it.

During an all-age Communion, the congregation is invited to come forward to the table as a sign that as God comes to us, so we come to him. The church meeting decided that bread and wine would remain for those who are baptised, but we do no check. More recently, the children have begun to receive grapes and a biscuit as a sign of their journey towards baptism. I was unsure about this at first and there is a danger that it becomes just a means of helping parents when younger children are wanting bread, but it seems to work. We have also said that anyone intentionally on their way to baptism (that is, they are undergoing preparation) should be free if they wish to receive bread and wine.

**By Andy Goodliff**