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CHRIST'S WAY-BREAD FOR A CHILD

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But we call it lembas or waybread, and it is more strengthening than any food made by Men," . . . "All the same, we bid you spare the food," they said. "Eat a little at a time, and only at need. For these things are given to serve you when all else fails. The cakes will keep sweet for many, many days, if they are unbroken and left in their leaf-wrappings, as we have brought them. One will keep a traveller on his feet for a day of long labour, even if he be one of the tall Men of the Minas Tirith.¹

J. R. R. TOLKIEN'S *LORD OF THE RINGS* TRILOGY is now legendary. In the first book of the series, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, there is a powerful scene in which the real heroes of the story, little people called Hobbits, are presented with way-bread for their long journey. This mysterious food is unique because it only takes a little to provide much. It is small yet it is large in effect. It can feed the largest of people and therefore, by implication, the smallest, lowliest of creatures—such as the Hobbits—for a long, long time.

J. R. R. Tolkien was a devout Christian. Christian theology and imagery

1. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), 360–61.

abound throughout his classic story.² Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, and other intellectual members of that distinguished group, the Inklings, met in a pub in Oxford every Tuesday for many years to discuss their writings that became a form of Christian apologetics. They discovered fantasy literature as a way to slip up on the academic community with the Christian message. They could say the most profound Christian realities under the imagery of other, science fiction-like worlds. For C. S. Lewis it was the world of Narnia. For Tolkien it was the realm of the Shire and the Hobbits. These imaginary realms were all used to convey a Christian world and life view.

In regard to way-bread, for example, the amazing food is no doubt a symbol of the sacrament of Holy Communion. In the New Testament, pieces of bread broken in Holy Communion are the crumbs from the table of God. Jesus graphically communicated this sacramental reality in His meeting with a woman pleading for the healing of her child. He told her, "It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs" (Matt. 15:25). Her response was simply, "Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table" (v. 27). The Son of God commended her for her "great faith" (v. 28).

The woman in essence was arguing that a little bit of God's blessing goes a long way. All she needed was a small portion of what He offered. In the final analysis, a piece of what the Lord gives is all one needs, for a part actually forms the whole. This principle carried over to the sacramental reality of the Lord's Supper in which the church is given crumbs from the Lord's table, a small portion of bread and wine representing the entire reality. One of the most famous prayers in the ancient Eucharistic liturgies of the church incorporates this teaching: "We do not presume to come to this Thy table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness but in Thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under Thy table. . . ."³

Pieces of bread are broken that represent the Lord Jesus Christ in some mysterious way. Yet those little pieces of bread and sip of wine are like the way-bread for the Hobbits. It is enough for big people, and even other small ones. Could it even be argued that *children* need the way-bread of Christ for the adult journey of life?

CHILDREN COMING TO JESUS . . . OH MY!

Once upon a time, children were prevented from coming to Christ. As a matter of fact, one of the most shocking scenes in the New Testament

2. Norman F. Cantor, *Inventing the Middle Ages* (New York: Quill William Morrow, 1991), 205–33.

3. The 1928 edition of the *Book of Common Prayer*, 82.

concerns the spiritual mistreatment of children by those who should have known better. The text of Holy Scripture records, "Then little children were brought to Him that He might put His hands on them and pray, but the disciples rebuked them" (Matt. 19:13). The parents of these children took them to Christ for a blessing, for Him to lay on hands for this specific purpose. This practice was an ancient way of patriarchs, teachers (rabbis), and redemptive deliverers of the Old Testament to transfer the promissory blessings of the covenant of God. It was a moment of the greatest of privilege for these parents and their children to be escorted into the presence of the Son of the Living God to receive the laying on of hands.

Disgustingly, "the disciples rebuked them." How un-pastoral! Loving parents brought their covenant children to Jesus. The closest followers of the Son of God told them to go away. Where could the disciples possibly have derived from Biblical history or from Christ's teaching and ministry that He would have wanted them to fence His presence from children? Somehow, they thought that Jesus and children needed to be protected from one another. Whatever the answer to this vexing question of providing some rationale to how the disciples' minds were working at the moment, the ramification of pushing little children away from Jesus' tactile transfer of blessing was offensive to Him. The actions of the disciples understandably provoked the Master's displeasure.

Given Christ's response, it seems the situation directly warns those who would tell little children to stay away from a tactile, tangible, yes sacramental, or any association with Jesus. The matter of children at baptism or at the Eucharist thereby touches the "forbid not the children" passage. Our purpose is not with the subject of baptism,⁴ particularly infant baptism, to which this passage is often applied. Clearly, it informs the theology of baptism, forming also the sacramental foundation in Matthew 19, for the theology of the recipients of the Lord's Supper.

Matthew 19 speaks of children being brought into the real presence of Christ for the laying on of His hands for a blessing. Later in the Gospel at the Last Supper, the Eucharist is made into the source of blessing by the laying on of the hands of Christ. The Eucharist, as a point for receiving the blessing of the Lord, continues in the rest of the New Testament. St. Paul, for example, speaks of Holy Communion as real fellowship (*koinōnia*) with Christ in some sense (1 Cor. 10:16), and therefore the means of tangible

4. Ray R. Sutton, *Signed, Sealed and Delivered: A Study of Holy Baptism* (Houston: Classical Anglican Press, 2001), 159–74. I specifically wrote this book to present a biblical, theological, and pastoral analysis of the subject of baptism. Chapters 7 and 8 on infant baptism should be consulted for an application of the Matthew 19 passage to the sacrament of baptism.

blessing.⁵ The biblical logic is flawless.

Christ instituted the Lord's Supper as a means of grace to convey His presence after He was gone. Just as Christ could be met by children in Matthew 19, so He can be met in, at, with, or by means of faithful reception of the Lord's Supper. If He is there in some sense, then the same principles of admission into His presence established in the Gospels, and in Matthew 19 in particular, would apply.

Since the church really meets Jesus at the Eucharist, however real presence would be understood, the passage about the overly-protective disciples is also critically relevant to the issue of young-child communion. Disallowing children into the sacramental presence of Jesus could be tantamount to the same violation of the disciples when they forbade children from coming to Jesus for His blessing. Thus, a consideration of the "forbid not the children" text should carefully be understood for its Eucharistic applications to young humans.

THE BROADER CONTEXT OF MATTHEW 19

A context appears in St. Matthew that demands *wisdom*, a predominant theme in the Gospel. Jesus is presented in this Gospel as the true Solomon and wise teacher of Israel.⁶ Time and again, the events of Christ's life call for the kind of divine wisdom that He can uniquely give. Only He, like Solomon of old, is able to solve the riddles presented through catastrophe (storm at sea), need (food in the wilderness), sickness (blindness), demon possession, opposition, and even antagonistic, trick questions such as in Matthew 19. In this case, the questions concern the family. The situation reminds us of another circumstance when the true king of Israel, the first Solomon, was presented with a family crisis.

The Hebrew king was brought two women both claiming to be the mother of a child (1 Kings 3:16–28). King Solomon called for a sword to settle the dispute. He decided to divide the child in half and give each mother part of the child. Faced with the gruesome death of her child, the real mother revealed her love by a willingness to give the child to the

5. St. Paul speaks of the "cup of blessing which we bless." Note that an inanimate object, a "cup of blessing," is blessed. This was the biblical argument against the Puritans by the Anglicans for the Scriptural allowance of blessing things as well as people. The blessed cup of blessing in some way was therefore set apart for use by God to apply His grace. In this sense, the sacrament becomes a means of grace. God is not trapped in a material object, but He clearly associates His presence with it such that it is a blessing used by Him to convey grace.

6. Richard A. Burridge, *Four Gospels, One Jesus?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 65–98.

pretender mother. The true mother was then recognized by all, and awarded her rightful child by Solomon. The child was spared, but most of all, Solomon's miraculous gift of wisdom from on high was manifested to the world. This was not just any king. It was a king imbued with the very mind of God through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Moreover, in the context of 1 Kings, God demonstrates in history what He had promised the mighty king in private. The holy potentate had asked for wisdom when given the chance to have anything or anyone he wanted (1 Kings 3:5–15). Like a loyal child of the covenant, he had asked for wisdom. God gave it.

Immediately following this godly request, the dispersal of grace was therefore graphically portrayed in the scene of the quarreling women. A family, a child, and both mothers were saved from disastrous consequences of disobedience. The stage is set for later when another Messianic, Solomonic King of all kings would save families, even Gentile ones, for the covenant.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is revealed as the true Son of David, a title mentioned in the first line of the genealogy at the beginning of the book (Matt. 1:1). The initial true son of David was Solomon. The ultimate and eventual Son of David, the final Redemptive-Deliverer, like Solomon, was of course Jesus Christ. Hence, Christ the Messiah is presented in the Gospel of Matthew as the true Son of David and Son of Abraham, the long-expected wise teacher of wisdom. Accordingly, the Gospel of Matthew is arranged in terms of the sermons of Jesus—wisdom teachings. These teachings often follow, or are the result of, scenes analogous to the women quarreling before King Solomon. All the events confronting the Solomonic Christ cry out for wisdom to resolve them. With event after event, Christ follows wisdom teaching with wisdom encounter. A perplexing question or scene evokes wisdom. Christ mysteriously provides the solution every time.

Wisdom was once again required in the Matthew 19, when the Pharisees asked Christ a difficult question about divorce. In fairness to the Pharisees, they understood that the Old Testament spoke of the great and final eschatological kingdom, the return of the Solomonic domain on earth in all its fullness. They believed that one like Solomon, but greater, would become King of the Jews. The Gentiles were to come into the holy covenant of God, meaning Israel would finally fulfill its mission to be “a light to lighten the Gentiles.” The Jews were to accomplish their mission just as the people of God did in Solomon's day—by means of wisdom, since they lacked superior military might. Solomon taught the Gentiles (1 Kings 10:1–15 and the Queen of Sheba) wisdom and attracted their leaders to the kingdom of God with his profound insight. The Jewish leaders of Jesus' day were in

some sense looking for this type of Messiah.

The Gospel of Matthew presents an apologetic for Christ as the final Solomon who brings the Gentiles into the covenant with wisdom. The tax gatherer, servant of a pseudo-Solomon, Herod, came to see Jesus as the wise Messiah to bring the Gentile world to the Heavenly Father. He ends with this didactic, wisdom way of accomplishing the mission of being a light to lighten the Gentiles. The passage is called the Great Commission (28:19–20). It even speaks of the teaching mission of the church as “discipling the nations,” the “nations” literally being the Gentiles (cf. the Greek text of 28:19, “disciple the nations”). This means the Gentile nations would be reconciled through baptizing and teaching the Word of the Lord, the achievement of which would become the eschatological fulfillment of the kingdom of Solomon. The coming of this kingdom, however, raised questions about the family, and particularly about divorce, for the expectant Pharisees.

THE IMMEDIATE CONTEXT OF MATTHEW 19

The Pharisees provoked the need for the wisdom of Solomon by asking questions about the legitimacy of divorce. The questions seem to come from nowhere. Jesus’ response indicates His penetrating comprehension of the real issue(s). He answered their queries with the original intent of marriage (vv. 4–5). From Jesus’ perspective, the initial design of humanity’s most sacred union lay behind any questions about divorce. In the Garden of Eden, one man and one woman were intended for each other as long as they lived. First, male and female were to start out in a parent/child relationship. This birth relation of dependence on parents was to be only temporary. The ultimate purpose of a man and woman was to be found in the blessing of marriage.

The Lord describes the blessing as a one-flesh union, where two become one without losing their distinctness as persons. Their oneness is a mystery so sublime and fulfilling that it transcends the physical.⁷ It is an organic union modeled after only the most sacred of unions in the universe, the triune union of the three persons of the Godhead, and the hypostatic union of the divine and the human natures in Christ. Two become one without losing their distinctness. They enfold into each other such that their oneness creates a companionship closer than any other. The means for being joined in the one-flesh relation of man and woman is God’s own declaration, a solemn oath: “What God has joined together, let

7. Mike Mason, *The Mystery of Marriage* (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Books, 1985), 87–111.

not man put asunder" (19:6).⁸ A one-flesh relation in the context of a permanent commitment and the pronouncement of God Almighty is the way marriage was intended by the Lord to be formed from the beginning.

Thus, Jesus moved the topic of divorce back to the original fulfillment of marriage, for only it could put divorce into proper perspective. Like all great teachers, Jesus knew what had to be understood before secondary questions could be answered. In the face of the wonder of the mystery of marriage, the woe of divorce could only be broached by these teachers. The Pharisees seemed oblivious to the level to which Jesus was attempting to take their conversation. Instead, they took His penetrating insight to the tangential issue of divorce. They wanted to know how divorce could be allowed if God had desired for marriage to be permanently wonderful. More importantly perhaps, they were attempting to see how the Solomon of an age of the world to come, when marriage would be restored, would deal with the haunting travesty of divorce. The Lord's answer explains that divorce was only ever allowed because of the "hardness of your hearts." Sin necessitates divorce. As long as sin is in the world, covenant relations will die the death introduced by the perniciousness of original sin. Nevertheless, Jesus returned to His initial point about the design of the Divine: "But from the beginning it was not so" (19:9).

Not to neglect their questions totally, the Lord Solomon then adds further explanation of the biblical rationale for divorce. Fornication is the only justification, indicating that divorce was to be the exception, not the rule. The Greek word for fornication encompassed covenantal unfaithfulness having to do primarily with sexual perversion, adultery, and including witchcraft and idolatry.⁹ Significantly, Christ's exception for divorce precisely matches Moses' allowance for ending a marital relation. The ancient law-maker had used the phrase to describe a justifiable reason, "an unclean thing." The phrase can be literally translated, "uncovering nakedness." It is used of sexual relations, especially those that are illicit. Apparently, therefore, Jesus had implemented a word for allowing divorce that perfectly captured the same intent as Moses' legislation. As He stated at the beginning of the Gospel, He had not come to abolish the law and the

8. Gordon P. Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 216–79. Hugenberger has an excellent discussion of the oath-ratifying form of the marriage covenant. Also, on page 151, the author develops further the parallel between Jesus' declaration and Genesis 2:24, as well as Malachi 2:15.

9. John Lightfoot, *Horae Hebraicae et Talmudicae*, Works, ed. Pitman (London, 1823), 9:116–17.

prophets but to fulfill them (Matt. 5:17). He was not altering Moses.¹⁰

Thus, in typical Solomonic wisdom, Jesus carefully avoided contradicting Moses while providing brilliant insight in the Holy Scriptures. He directed their attention to His redemptive intent. He had come to restore the family, to take marriage back to what it was intended to be. Furthermore, this concern to heal the family was part of His larger mission of reconciling the nations. The Gospel ends with a Great Commission to “disciple the nations.” The Book of Acts records how the nations were actually brought to the Gospel. The message of Christianity was spread household by household (cf. Acts 16). In every mention of someone with a family who is converted in the New Testament the household is directly or indirectly said to be baptized.¹¹ “Consider all of the references to baptism in the New Testament. There are ten specific instances cited. Two of those have to do with individuals, such as the conversion of Paul (Acts 9:18) and the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:38). In these references, ‘there are no families to be baptized.’”¹² The disciple-making that Jesus commanded was intended to be in terms of the family unit, not just individuals.¹³ Thus, the Gentile nations were to be brought family by family to Christ.

The setting of Matthew 19 reinforces this larger intent to disciple the Gentile nations. At the beginning of the chapter, Matthew informs us that the conversation with the Pharisees occurs on “the coasts of Judea beyond the Jordan” (19:1). This was Gentile territory, meaning the interrogation by the Pharisees was set amidst the very Gentile world that was part of disciple-making to Christ.

This Gentile setting is also a Solomonic theme fulfilling the Abrahamic covenant. The Abrahamic covenant (Genesis 15, 17) spoke of how the seed of Abraham would consist of kings and nations, somehow encompassing the Gentile world. In the Old Testament there were brief glimpses of this prophecy. Joseph went to Egypt, was elevated to a position of influence and even became part of Pharaoh’s household. Solomon extended the

10. John Murray, *Divorce* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1961), 14.

11. A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), 616–22.

12. Sutton, *Signed, Sealed and Delivered*, 169. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, 622.

13. It should be observed that the language of the Great Commission could imply the family by family approach. Jesus commanded, “Disciple the nations, baptizing them . . .” The personal pronoun “them” is masculine. Its antecedent is “nations,” neuter. Normally in the Greek language, pronoun and antecedent have the same gender unless there is some kind of special emphasis being made. The discrepancy between pronoun and antecedent could imply that disciple-making was not to be done individual by individual.

teachings of the law to Gentile monarchs like the Queen of Sheba. In a sense, Christ was beginning to do the same. He stood outside the land, essentially telling the Pharisees how the Law of Moses, particularly regarding marriage, would be applied to the Gentiles. The means for taking Moses to the Gentiles would be through Christ. Specifically, He would restore their families, indeed their children, to the altar of His presence.

CHILDREN IN THE SANCTUARY OF THE LORD'S PRESENCE

Having acquitted Himself well of the Pharisees at the beginning of Matthew 19, families begin to come to Christ in the pericope immediately following the discussion on marriage and divorce. The leaders of families listening to Jesus become convinced that He is the one to bless their homes. Maybe they were Gentiles. Perhaps in their mind they began to make the connection between ancient, Old Testament passages that spoke of a new covenant—a Solomonic age when families, even Gentile ones, would be restored. The curse of Genesis 3 would be removed, and the blessing of God would return to parents and their children. Marriage and family would be taken back to their original intention when the greater Solomon brought in the new covenant.¹⁴

In fact, the Old Testament prophets such as Malachi described the effect of the Messianic age as the healing of parent/child relations. They coalesced the bringing of the Gentiles into the covenant with the restoration of the family.

Remember ye the law of Moses my servant, which I commanded unto him in Horeb for all Israel, with the statutes and judgments. Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord: and He shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse. (Mal. 4:4–6)

Notice the flow of the final verses of the prophet Malachi. He begins with the call to observe the Law of Moses. He then speaks of an eschatological moment in time when another “Elijah” would be sent. Importantly, the other, second Elijah cannot be comprehended until the first one is understood.

The first Elijah, who lived long before the prophet Malachi, introduced a proleptic new covenant by entering the land of the Gentiles. There he healed a family and restored a child to its mother, who was a widow.

14. Hugenberger, *Marriage as Covenant*, 13–26.

The scene occurred outside the land of Israel in the same way the encounters between the Pharisees and Jesus and the rejection of the little children by Christ's disciples took place in Gentile territory. Elijah journeyed beyond Israel's borders to a place where he was even cared for by a Gentile widow woman (1 Kings 17:10–24). His presence brought light (oil for the lamp) and sustenance (food) without end (17:14). He also raised up her son from death. The mercy of light and life were extended to the Gentiles outside the land. Like Solomon, Elijah took the kingdom of God to a Gentile woman and, in this case, her child or heir.

The imagery is powerful. The blessings of God restored the woman's family. Most importantly, the blessings of light and life were given to her child. A hallmark of the coming of this new covenant was its impact on the family, specifically the place of children in the covenant. Children would be blessed, restored into the covenantal presence of God, just the way the widow's child had been raised up by Elijah. This new covenant ministry therefore reversed the curse by bringing blessings to the family and especially the children.

The expectation of the Messianic (Solomonic) Age was that children would be brought by their parents, through the aforementioned familial restoration, before God at His altar. This meant that children would one day, under a coming new covenant, be able to worship fully with their families in God's immediate presence. In the language of the psalmist, children would praise God in the temple (Ps. 148:12; Mal. 4:4–6). It should be remembered that women and children were technically not allowed before the altar/table of God in the old covenant temple. In some sense they were not permitted the benefit of blessing in this holy place context. Yet, Malachi clearly spoke of a day when all of this would change. Children would be allowed back at the altar/table of the Lord.¹⁵ Malachi and other prophets refer to the altar interchangeably with the word table (Ezek. 41:22; Mal. 1:7).¹⁶ Hence, for those parents bringing their children to the new Elijah—Jesus—He had provoked an insight indirectly by answering questions about Mosaic legislation on divorce.

The parental bystanders to the interrogation of Jesus about divorce seemingly got the message, whereas the disciples did not. Like all biblical parents wanting the spiritual best for their children, the believing familial guardians of Christ's day drew near to the one they perceived to be the Son of David, the ultimate Elijah, and Solomon, all wrapped up in one

15. Ronald C. D. Jasper, ed., *Worship and the Child: Essays by the Joint Liturgical Group* (SPCK, 1975), 9.

16. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, Tremper Longman III, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove: Illinois, 1998), 21. See article on "Altar," 20–21.

Person. Their desire was for Him to lay hands on their offspring. The disciples, by contrast, surprisingly interpreted this holy parental desire as an encroachment, a massive violation of some spiritual reality. The word describing the disciples' response is "rebuke," not a mild term. They fenced the presence of Christ from parents and their children. Why would the disciples respond so harshly as to prevent children from coming near to Christ?

The disciples were still thinking entirely in terms of a pre-Messianic Age, old covenant separatist model. For the disciples, this meant the sanctuary of the Lord was closed to women and children. No young ones were allowed into the presence of the Holy Place where the Almighty had His throne of glory. The separatist model endemic to the old covenant holiness code prevented all except the priests to approach the holy place, the Temple.¹⁷ Children, not even the children of priests, were not allowed near the holy things of God. The little ones could partake of the Passover, but the sacred space of worship was out of bounds. They could not enter the Holy of Holies and certainly not partake of the showbread from the Holy table in God's presence. Only the priests and the Messianic king, who was by definition a priest of a higher order (cf. Genesis 14, noting the Melchizedekian priest and king, and Hebrews 7, in which a greater priesthood than the Aaronic priesthood is discussed), were allowed. Thus Christ had directly addressed legislation about divorce and remarriage, while at the same time announcing to all parents that a new Solomon and a new kingdom and covenant had come, by which families and children would be restored to God and His altar.

The parents who came to Christ with their children clearly sensed a new day was taking place. One of the signs of the inauguration of the ultimate Davidic kingdom was that children would begin to praise the name of God (Ps. 148:12). They would want their children to be allowed to partake of the holy things of God just like the priests, because they, by some covenantal means (Holy Baptism), were also priests and kings before the most high God. Indeed all were permitted entrance into the holy presence of God, especially the Temple. Not long after the scene involving children being brought by parents to Christ, the triumphal entry of Christ into Jerusalem occurred. It was such an important eschatological moment because it was an indicator of the fulfillment of what had been spoken of in the Old Testament. Not surprisingly, in the same Gospel of Matthew the Evangelist calls attention to the fact that the "children were crying out in the temple and saying, 'Hosanna to the Son of David' " (Matt. 21:15).

17. Alfred Edersheim, *The Temple* (1958, repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 61–81.

Presumably, these were the children who had been blessed by Jesus in the passage under consideration. They, having been received into His presence with His blessing, accompanied the Messiah into the city. They joined all the people in placing palm leaves on the ground before the anointed King of kings.

Matthew also calls attention later in his Gospel to the fact that the chief priests and scribes were “indignant” when they saw children come into the Temple, a place forbidden to them in the old covenant. The parallel between their response to children in the presence of the Lord, and the disciples’ when children are brought before Christ, is glaring. Both groups responded the same way to children in the holy place before the Holy Person. In the first instance, however, the parents persist. They desired for their children the blessing of Christ through the laying on of hands, a pattern not unfamiliar to the people of God in the Old Testament.

TACTILE BLESSING

Obtaining the blessing of God is a major theme in the Old Testament as well as in the New Testament, according to teaching in the Gospel of Matthew. Starting with the Old Testament, blessing was the promise of God through His personal presence in one’s life and family. Blessing was the favor of God, but this favor was translated into time and space by the real presence of God with His people. Time and again, God specifies to the recipients of His blessing-promise that “He would be their God and they would be His people” (Gen. 17:7; Ex. 6:7). Literally, He would be with them and they would be with Him. The great promise of the covenantal presence of God was first given in the Garden of Eden after the fall of humanity into sin. God promised a Seed, a Son, who would crush the head of the serpent and inaugurate a new creation, a new heavens and earth, a new Eden. Throughout the Old Testament, the recipients of this promise were narrowed. After all, the initial promise was for a Seed, singular, who would accomplish what God wanted (Gal. 3). From Adam and Eve, the promissory line expanded and then contracted through one man, Abraham. He became the covenantal narrowing point through which the promise of God’s blessing would pass. God reiterated to Abraham the details of the promissory blessing. He told Abraham again that a Seed would eventually spring from him who would accomplish all that was promised to the people of God. This Seed, once again singular, would be the true heir. All who were covenantally united to this heir would also receive the blessing of the personal redemptive presence of God.¹⁸

18. Samuel Baron Pufendorf, *The Divine Feudal Law: or, Covenants with Mankind Represented Together with Means for Uniting Protestants, in which also the Principles of*

Importantly, this promise of blessing was transferred through the laying on of the hands of the patriarchs (Gen. 27:4, 17–33; 48:5–14). Before each old sage died, the selected child was to come or be brought to him for the blessing. The elder saint would extend his hand and touch the recipient, simultaneously announcing special blessing. Lest one doubt the importance of the tactile, the story of Jacob's blessing of the sons of Joseph is revealing. At the final moment, the old patriarch crossed his hands and blessed the younger by his touch. The younger inherited the promise of blessing (Gen. 48:13–14). Why the tactile succession? The reasons are juridical and incarnational.

First, the placing of the hand(s) on the successor was a form of oath-taking, the juridical. This oath was a way of declaring the legal heir of the promise. The covenant oath included sanctions of blessing and cursing. When the covenant heir gathered the successor to transfer the blessing by means of the laying on of hands, he often enumerated twofold sanctions of blessing and cursing. They consisted of blessing and cursing as described in the final blessings and cursings of Jacob to his children (Gen. 49). The blessings and cursings are expanded in Deuteronomy 27–28. They are the detailed benefits of faithfulness to the covenant. They range from the assurance of God's presence to answered prayer to tangible provision. In summary, the blessings are the recreation of an edenic atmosphere, wherever the believer might be, through the personal presence of the redemptive deliverer. In a sense, the garden-like ambiance of God's presence accompanies one in covenant with the Lord's true heir.

The curses are the opposite. They were the absence of God's presence and the lack of an edenic world. They were everything from distance from God to dispossession of all that God had given. To be cursed was to have the edenic world literally dismantled—de-created—as was the case in the first Eden when Adam and Eve rebelled against God. The first parents were driven outside into the wilderness and away from the garden.

Covenant sanctions assured that the transfer by touch was not magi-

the Lutheran Churches are Stated and Defended, trans. Theophilus Dorington (London, 1703). See also D. A. Weir, *Foedus Naturale: The Origins of Federal Theology in Sixteenth-Century Reformed Thought* (St. Andrew's University PhD, 1984). Pufendorf was a German Lutheran scholar at Heidelberg University at the end of the seventeenth century. He is important because he developed federal theology on a feudal model, which modified the overly contractual approach of pure federalism. He attempted a *via media* between the Reformed and the Lutherans with a more organic element to the covenant. For fuller discussion of the importance of this scholar, cf. Ray R. Sutton, *The Sacramental Theology of Daniel Waterland* (Wycliffe Hall, Oxford/Coventry University PhD, 1998), 70–79.

cal. It entitled the recipient to the blessing, assuming he were faithful. It also sealed his doom should he ever abandon the covenant (Ishmael, Esau, the rebellious sons of Jacob, and so forth). Faithfulness, in other words, was required for the blessings to be applied. They would not come mechanically.

Second, the touch of the patriarch was more than a legal process of declaring an heir; it was a way of extending the promise of God's presence in terms of a human representative united to the Lord. This could only be done by means of a person. The grace of God was not ethereal, a kind of blessing in a vacuum or a vapor (Gnosticism). It was concretely expressed through the creation, specifically, a relation of persons involving the Persons of the Living God, the Holy Trinity. This human connection to the Lord, therefore, narrowed to specific redemptive deliverers in the covenant lineage a succession of heads of the covenant set apart by God through previous representatives to accomplish His redemptive plan. The touch of the redemptive deliverer, whether patriarch, king, or priest, was essential to personal transfer of the presence of the one who preceded to the one who succeeded, so that the succession was directly and historically connected to the presence of God Almighty through the laying on of hands. To be in covenant union with God's representative was to be mysteriously united with God.

The above reasoning even became a new covenant argument in the New Testament. The apostle John used the visual, verbal, and—importantly—the tactile connection to Jesus to distinguish false heirs of the covenant from the true ones. Only the ones who had seen with their eyes, heard with their ears, and touched with their hands the “Word of life” were the true apostles (1 John 1). The apostle announced to the recipients of his first epistle that that which they have seen and handled they declared unto them, that is, transferred by the means of the same proof of reality: seeing, handling (touching as in the laying on of hands), and declaring. The new covenant does not remove the requirement of the laying on of hands for the proper transfer of God's anointed presence from one disciple to another, particularly when it comes to ordination (1 Tim. 4:14).

For clarification, one's being was not confused with God's by the laying on of hands. There was no apotheosis of Creator and creature. Rather, the union was a joining in some inexplicable way of a person, and all who were connected to him, to the Almighty through the covenant Seed. In a sense, the Old Testament redemptive deliverers were the incarnation of God's presence. Because of this incarnational presence of the Almighty, wisdom became a distinct manifestation of the nearness of God. If God were with someone, then that person would demonstrate this presence by means of wise teachings. For this reason, the Solomonic teacher or rabbi

was considered to possess the covenant blessing and able to transfer it through tactile laying on of hands, as well as teaching.

Blessing was proof of the tactile. At the incarnation, the presence of God was enfleshed in a person, the God-Man, Jesus Christ. Presence of the Almighty came through the Person of the Lord walking on earth. St. Matthew reveals that Jesus is identified as the ultimate Redemptive Deliverer in history by His wisdom teachings. His Gospel begins by defining Jesus as the "Son of David" (Matt. 1), implying that He is the true Solomon. The Gospel develops further, in the first four chapters, a distinct emphasis on the Joseph character, Jesus' earthly father, who displayed wisdom like a previous Joseph, a descendant of Jacob in Genesis 37-50. The sequence of events in the first four chapters of Matthew even follows the pattern of the Joseph pericope(s) in Genesis 37-50. The Joseph who was the father of Jesus, for example, is led back to Israel by dreams.

After the first four chapters of Matthew, Jesus begins to teach like a Solomonic rabbi. The heart of His wisdom teaching was blessing through the character of His presence. He called these blessings "beatitudes" (Matt. 5:1-8). From His description of beatitude, only one could possess them all, which is exactly what St. Matthew wants his readers to conclude. It is the Christ, the Promised One of old, the son of Abraham, the Son of David, the definitive Solomon, all of whom were human links transferring the grace of God through history. Since He is the source of blessing, He was to be sought out just as any great rabbi was pursued for his acknowledgement.

The observant parents in Matthew 19, therefore, beheld the Lord's wisdom as He spoke to the scribes and Pharisees. They reached one very important conclusion: Jesus is the Christ, and, as such, the blessing of the promise of the Old Testament comes only by His touch. So they drew near to Him, bringing their young children to be marked by His presence that they might be united with Him and ultimately the promise.

THE TRANSFER OF BLESSING TO THE EUCHARIST

The Lord Jesus Christ focused His blessing in and through the Eucharist when He instituted the Lord's Supper. There is a similarity of pattern between the blessing of children brought by their parents and the blessing at the very institution of Holy Communion. On the night in which Jesus was betrayed, He took bread and wine, prayed or blessed the elements, and then distributed them to the disciples. In the original (Greek) text of Matthew 26:26, the verse reads, "And Jesus taking and blessing He broke." The literal touching and blessing are parallel. The Lord blesses the bread by the laying on of hands through the grasp of the element. This way of blessing was very familiar to these Jewish followers of Jesus. As has been

developed already, they understood that blessing came through the laying on of hands by the Redemptive Deliverer. What is significant is that this blessing associates His presence with the elements themselves.

Importantly, Jesus speaks of the set-apart bread and wine as “this is My Body,” “this is My blood.” His presence is associated with the elements of bread and wine. This is not the same as saying that the bread and the wine were changed in their substance (transubstantiation), a false teaching for which there was a Reformation in the sixteenth century. Nevertheless, neither should the elements be viewed as mere symbols, making them into the real absence of Christ. This would be making Christ’s words into nonsense. His declaration that the bread and the wine were His Body and Blood would be falsely interpreted to mean they are not His Body and Blood, a tautology to say the least.

If one takes the Bible realistically (some would say literally), then Christ has somehow associated His own flesh and blood with the Holy Communion. He is really present in a mystical sense, which means His presence should be acknowledged on the basis of the plain teaching of Scripture. At the same time, the way in which Christ is present is a mystery. It is like the mystery of the Holy Trinity, or the hypostatic union of the divinity and the humanity of Christ in the second person of the Godhead. These realities are affirmed according to Scriptural teaching even though they are not able to be comprehended.

In the history of the study of liturgy, this procedure of blessing the physical elements through the laying on of hands is called a manual act. In the ancient liturgies of the church, manual acts are required of the minister for the blessing of the elements. At one very simple level, the church is to continue to bless Holy Communion exactly the way Jesus did. At another level, there is an important theological reason as revealed later in the Scriptures.

St. Paul’s comments about the relation of blessing and the elements confirm that indeed the elements are to be set apart or blessed, thereby facilitating Christ’s continued meeting of His people through the Holy Supper. How can this be? The apostle elaborates that through the bread and the wine the recipient really communes with Christ. The exact language of the apostle is, “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?” (1 Cor. 10:16). The Greek word translated “communion” is an important New Testament term from which we derive the word *koinōnia*. This word actually means “to participate in,”

or “to partake of.”¹⁹ Indeed, the following verse states that believers are really united by partaking of a common spiritual food: “For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread” (1 Cor. 10:17). The communion or *koinōnia* provided by the consecrated bread and wine in some incomprehensible yet real way unites the participant to Christ, the “communion of the body and blood of Christ,” and joins fellow believers together at one and the same time. This is the precise argument of the apostle.

By looking at the Eucharistic institution passages of the Gospels together with St. Paul’s commentary, Christ transfers the blessing of His presence somehow to and through the Eucharist. He is at the Eucharist in a special way. He promised that bread and wine would be Him in some inexplicable way. The church continues what Christ modeled at the Last Supper. The apostles repeat the practice of blessing by means of the tactile, the laying on of hands. For this reason, therefore, the sacramental elements become a means of grace and point of contact with the blessing of Christ.

If indeed the Christ is at the Eucharist, He is the Host, which is why the bread has historically been called the Host. Anyone who receives the Lord’s Supper in covenantal faithfulness is blessed by Him. This would include children as well as adults. There is nothing in St. Paul to qualify the reception of blessing only to adults. All at the Holy Supper faithfully encountering the Living Christ are blessed by His touch.

Since all faithful followers of Christ are to come or to be brought for blessing in the Eucharist, this has been worked out a variety of ways in the history of the church. Sometimes it has meant only that unconfirmed children would be brought to the rail for the priest/presbyter to lay on hands and bless children. Better yet, children have been allowed to partake of the actual Supper, which is the plain application of the reality of the blessing of the Eucharist in the context of the meaning of blessing in the new covenant.

Jesus wanted little children to be allowed into His presence, to be blessed by Him. He wanted to transfer the covenantal blessing through His touch. The Eucharist is the biblical extension of His touch. He blessed the first Eucharist and commended His followers to do the same. He even laid hands on them and instructed that the setting apart of His ministers would involve the tactile principle. Again, the presence of the person, in this case the person of Christ, is conveyed by a manual act. Through the laying on hands of the first ministers of the new covenant, and they to the Eucharis-

19. The famous sixteenth-century Anglican scholar, Richard Hooker, liked to refer to this Pauline passage as the basis for a real-participation-view of the presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper.

tic elements at the offering of Holy Communion, the incarnational presence of the risen Christ was and is extended to all who receive the Lord's Supper. Coming to Christ for a blessing is therefore centered in the Eucharist from the Last Supper forward.

If the connection between the blessing of Christ's real presence and the Holy Communion is true, to forbid children from receiving this blessing is no less a violation than the disciples' resistance of the children brought by parents to be touched by the Master.²⁰ It is an old covenant response. It is a denial of the full privileges that have come as a result of the inauguration of the new covenant.

THE CHURCH'S NEW COVENANT RESPONSE TO CHILDREN

The church of the Lord Jesus Christ is called to have a new covenant response to children. They, along with women, are allowed full access to the holy things of God when the Messiah comes in history. This was promised throughout the Old Testament as one of the evidences that a greater Solomon had arrived.

The day Christ permitted little children to be blessed by Him, He signaled to the whole world that He was the Messiah of the new covenant. At a later time when He explained His presence in terms of bread and wine at the Passover meal, He referred to this as the new covenant in His blood. His touch of blessing was to be extended after His ascension by way of this promise through the Holy Communion.

The touch of His Supper explained the nature of the blessing as growth. Putting it negatively, the curse of the covenant is the removal of growth, the de-creation of the world into desert covered by thorns and thistles. The blessing of the covenant is growth like that of a garden. Jesus' touch brings life and growth. Hence, the Lord introduced through the Holy Communion the important principle of feeding on Him, albeit "after a heavenly and spiritual manner," to grow.²¹ The parents in Matthew 19 brought their children to be blessed for their own spiritual nurture and development. Christ responded to those parents and their children in a new covenant manner. He affirmed that His blessing is necessary for maturation. When He transferred His blessing and presence to the Holy Supper, He reinforced the reality that humans eat to grow. The church is to

20. Colin Buchanan, *Children in Communion* (Bramcote/Nottingham: Grove Books Limited, 1990), 10–14. Bishop Buchanan has a profound summary of the standard objections to paedocommunion with answers to those objections.

21. This way of explaining the presence of Christ in the Eucharist is found in the English Reformation confessional statement, *The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion*, Article 28.

commune with Christ for spiritual growth.

The church is to do no less than Christ when it comes to admitting people to the new covenant feast. If adults need food to grow, so do children. If adult believers require spiritual sustenance to mature, so do children. This is part of the blessing. They are not to be forbidden from the holy food of God.

The Lord's Supper is "way-bread" for the believer's journey in this world. J. R. R. Tolkien communicates this sacramental principle through the metaphor of way-bread in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Little hobbits are given the mystical food for their journey. They are told that just a small portion of lembas is enough to feed large people. By implication it is sufficient for the little folk, the hobbits. The New Testament teaches the same. A little bit of grace goes a long way. Crumbs from the table of God are necessary for expansive growth toward life for the world to come. Adults must have this spiritual food for their journey. So must children. To forbid them is to confine the church into spiritual immaturity. Instead, covenant children should be allowed to come to Christ's table for the way-bread of a child's journey, and, yes, even for the demands and adult's journey. All must eat to grow. If they do not, then they will die along the way from spiritual starvation no less than a hiker will expire in the wilderness without sustenance. Could this be why forbidding children the blessing of His food is so serious to Him? To keep the children from the Supper of the Lord is to cut off the means of grace and source of growth, indeed, the necessary way-bread of God.