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THE COMMUNION OF CHILDREN.

The following is from the *London Patriot*, the leading organ of the Congregationalists in Great Britain. We copy it, not for the purpose of expressing approval of all the sentiments it contains, but, to commend its earnest solicitude for the salvation of the young, and to show that while the desire for Infant membership secures Infant Baptism, it should, to be consistent, be followed by Infant Communion. Our readers will notice the paragraph on Baptism:

What a rare sight it is to see a child or very young person seated at the Table of the Lord! Other services are attended by whole families, parents and children, young and old, coming together. Not so when we perform that simple rite which commemorates the Saviour's dying love. On such occasions the younger branches of the family are left at home. Christian parents complacently seat themselves at the Lord's Table with none of their children beside them. The sweet faces and voices of the little ones are usually regarded as the life and beauty of a household. But Christ's household is a childless one, His family a sombre assembly of grown-up people, presenting the singular phenomenon of a large flock of sheep, composed, it may be, of three or four hundred individuals, with not a single lamb amongst them, absolutely not one. A tender-hearted visitor would not like his entrance into a house to be the signal for sending all the children out of sight and hearing; but when Christ is expected to be more than usually present, care is taken to keep them out of the way. And as far as this weighs with one exceedingly fond of children, I cannot but think that the Saviour is more dissatisfied with our ordinance gatherings than with any other of our religious assemblies. And this state of things has become so general in our churches, that the youthful absentees are not missed, indeed, their presence would be regarded as something extraordinary, requiring explanation, if not justification; for custom soon gathers force by prescription, and assumes the dignity of law. And our having arrived at such a pass, that the uniform absence from the Lord's Supper and the Church has well-nigh grown into a rule for their exclusion, appears from this, that when a child seeks admission to our fellowship, the minister is very apt to introduce the application with an elaborate defence, as though he expected some to demur to the membership of children as a thing of doubtful propriety. And so the young are admitted under a sort of protest.

Why should these things be? Why should the ordinance be virtually restricted to adults and such as are upon the verge of manhood or womanhood? Are children incapable of profiting from its observance? Are they never moved by the Spirit of God so as to be brought into sympathy with Divine truth? Let those worldly men answer who can testify that very early in life they were the subjects of impressions that might have been matured into piety, but, being neglected passed away, never perhaps to return. Or is it that we apprehend the lack in children of sufficient mental perception to understand the rite? Are they unable to appreciate the spiritual import of the breaking of bread and the pouring of wine? Would it be hard to make them see that the outward act has a symbolical meaning? On the contrary, it is more in harmony with the laws of the human mind to suppose that children are eminently fitted to profit by outward observances significant of higher truth. To instruct by signs is to teach by pictures, the recognised mode of appealing to the immature judgment and lively imagination of a child. The Supper addresses the mind through the medium of the senses, considered as an instrument of edification, is akin to the dispensation of types and shadows, a remnant, so to speak, of that ritualism by which God imparted light when the Church was in her infancy, and the little that remains of the elementary method, whilst profitable to the cultured heart of the

most advanced believer, seems peculiarly adapted to instruct the youthful mind unaccustomed to reflection, and slow to take in naked abstract truth. The tender years, then, of a child offer no hindrance to the intelligent and devout celebration of the Lord's Supper.

But it may be objected that the solemn rite would be liable to gross abuse in the hands of children, owing to the fickleness and frivolities of their age. As to those pleasures and gaieties incidental to youth, no exception can be taken to them unless we are prepared to pronounce such manifestations of youthful buoyancy unlawful, and to denounce them as sinful. If the cheerful exuberance of early life be innocent as it is joyous, it presents no obstacle to holy communion with the Saviour. With regard to the question of sincerity, those who have had most to do with children must tell us whether there is less confidence to be placed in the professions of a child, than in those of an adult. But what of stability? See how often the blossom is blighted, and the bud of early promise leads to disappointment! True; but this is under the present system. What if our method of treatment were changed, and greater care taken of the tender shoot of piety? What if the Church at once embraced the babe in Christ when a babe only, instead of leaving it to its chance, refusing to take charge of the weakling until it became stronger, and thus, in the majority of cases, ensuring the fate that is now deplored. The Good Shepherd gathers the lambs with His arm, and carries them in His bosom. The maternal instinct of nearly all animals is quick and constant when their young are most feeble, and in greatest danger of perishing. Does not the Christian Church follow those creatures whose whose sensibilities are dulled? Does she not, like the ostrich, expose her own offspring? Is she more than a stepmother to young believers? At any rate, let children have a trial. Do not condemn them beforehand. If there be the flickering of a hope in their favour, give them the benefit of it; and if, after fair experiment, our indulgence proves a failure, we can, with a clear conscience, return to the more rigid course.

Besides, does not Baptism entitle its subjects to all the outward ordinances of Christian worship? If not, of what use is it to a child baptized in infancy? What distinction does the Church make between the baptized and unbaptized? What privilege accrues to the former that is not equally at the disposal of the latter? What has become of covenant mercies descending from father to son? Are baptized children made to feel that the Church as a church looks fondly upon them, regarding them as, at least, related, and not distantly, to the household of faith? On the contrary, are they not treated as outsiders, subjected to the same process of candidature through which the offspring of aliens are made to pass, and not admitted to the loving confidence of Christ's people until their credentials have been rigorously examined and cautiously approved? Surely children were better off under the old dispensation than under the new. The law was more liberal than we make the Gospel to be. Can we wonder that youths and maidens look shyly upon the Church, that they are scared by the harshness of her features, and that few of them have resolution enough to work their way into her good graces?

The indirect and consequential mischiefs of growing up close to, but not within, the favoured circle of church life are very serious. Young persons so situated are often guilty of quenching the first promptings of the Spirit, and entertain the delusive notion that, not having made what is called a public profession of religion, they are freed from a large measure of responsibility. Then, on quitting the paternal roof for a distant residence, they leave relations and friends without the passport that would at once introduce them to a society of kindred minds in the new place. And, at this most critical period, when placed in novel circumstances, exposed to unwonted temptations, and needing more than ever the counsels of experienced piety, they find themselves amongst strangers, let loose from former restraints, and without anything in the shape of friendly Christian supervision. They may attend the house of God, but it is to sojourn, not abide—the Church being to them the mistress of an inn rather

than the mother of a family; so that, as on the week-day, so on the Sabbath, as bodily, so spiritually, they live in apartments and not at home.

But enough of this. Why enlarge upon ills too well known and universally lamented? I shall be asked for a remedy. The symptoms of the disease are patent to all; its consequences felt everywhere. Can any probable and practicable means of cure be devised? This is a paramount question; but how delicate in the handling, and how difficult of solution! It is something like presumption on the part of any to approach the matter with the hope of successful treatment. On the other hand, it would seem impertinent to have made the preceding strictures and observations if I close, without anything in the shape of practical application. I am bound, therefore, to attempt some improvement of what has been said, were it but to shield my remarks from the charge of unwarrantable obtrusion before the public eye.

1. And, first, I would suggest that permission to attend the ordinance of the Lord's Supper be made a preliminary step to full church-membership, instead of being one of its exclusive privileges, for the simple reason that church-membership involves a degree of responsibility, too heavy for the shoulders of a very young person, who may be competent, notwithstanding, to assist in celebrating the great act of atonement. The full member is entitled to a share in the transaction of the society, and it would be most unseemly for children to influence, by haud or voice, the church's executive. The system that permitted such an anomaly would not be guided by the Pauline rule of doing all things decently and in order. If young persons can profit by the ordinance long before they are old enough to take part in the direction and management of affairs needing a maturity of judgment, let them have the instructive means without the exercise of authority, and not be denied the former until they are ripe for the latter. The one need not be coincident with the other. This is what I mean by proposing to make freedom of access to the Lord's Table a preliminary step to full church-membership. The suggestion, carried into effect, would amount to the formation of a preparatory class for the young, and supply a connecting link between the family or school and the church.

2. Then, since the question would not, in the first instance, be one of full admission to the church, but relate to the probationary state only, we could afford to modify our terms of communion, relaxing them in favour of serious and well-trained children, so as to make it easier than it is at present for them to join us at the Supper of the Lord; and in order to such facility, it is indispensably necessary to remove the appearance even of an ordeal of spiritual inquiry in the porch of the church. The inquiry itself may be simple and easy to the last degree, and as incapable of harm as are those shadowy phantoms supposed to haunt the quiet resting-places of the dead. But who does not know the strangely-potent influence of these nonentities upon maturer minds than those of boys and girls? It is notorious that imaginary difficulties are more formidable than real ones, and that fear never fails to exaggerate the real. Now, an interview in private with the minister or deacon on the secret things of the soul must seem, not only very solemn, but extremely formidable, to a young and susceptible mind. The minister and deacon may be respected and loved; but who is prepared to open his heart to every one whom he respects and loves? Take the case of one of our elder scholars, arrived at that most awkward age, half boy, half man, when the voice changes, when the associations of childhood are leading to those of incipient manhood, the time of shyness and romance, of natural pride and reserve. Such a one is passing through a transition state of solemn interest, permanent habits are being acquired, the mind is engaged in shaping its opinions and sentiments for life. How important to bring strong plastic influences to bear upon the character that is now in course of rapid formation! But this most critical time is that at which a youth is least approachable. Perhaps the only one who enjoys his confidence is the Sunday-school teacher, and this sole friend, while convinced that a deep-toned and

hopeful earnestness pervades the spirit of his pupil, may find free converse with him on the workings of his mind almost impossible. Here is one to whom the necessity of an interview on the subject of personal religion with a comparative stranger, would prove an insuperable barrier to church communion. Yet the signs of a spiritual change, real, though elementary, may be obvious to the eye of every attentive observer. Is it not our duty to foster those early indications by making kindly overtures to those in whom they appear, taking our young friends by the hand and treating them as babes in Christ? Would it be wrong to invite them on easy terms to meet Christ at His table? And if Christ would not frown upon the act as taking too great a liberty, are we quite sure that the Church does well in imposing restrictions not made binding by the Master?

I would venture to suggest that the responsibility of determining the qualifications of children for the preparatory fellowship described be delegated to those who knew most about them, and have freest access to their mind and hearts. And as the confidential friends of most children are their parents and teachers, I would have the church look to these, and be guided by their testimony, so that children piously trained at home or school should be admitted to the ordinance on the application and recommendation of their parents or teachers; the persons thus received to be regarded as probationers rather than members, being entitled forthwith to all the means of grace, but not as yet charged with the graver responsibilities of complete Christian fellowship.

3. Lastly, I would recommend that the members of the probationary class, after having remained in it either a fixed term of years, or until they have reached a certain age, and having in the meantime led a consistent life, be admitted by a formal vote of the church into full communion. The intervening years would be a testing time far more effectual than the few weeks now required, the church the while not leaving the candidate at the door until his fate is settled, but sheltering him beneath her roof, watching over his progress with jealous yet tender care, and doing all in her power to foster the spiritual life she desires to see. Such an amiable course would probably succeed better than our present mode, and might be the means of drawing into our midst many out of the large numbers that year by year go hopelessly astray, or are for ever lost to church action and life.

Let those that object to making any change consider whether we are not, as things now stand, chargeable with acting the ungracious part of the disciples who tried to prevent babes from being brought to Christ—whether the Master would not prefer an error on the side of indulgence to one of severity, which, it is to be feared, we are daily committing, and whether our fault in the proposed change, if a fault at all, would not be regarded by Him as a slight and venial offence.

If any, failing to suggest another plan, are of opinion that the one indicated above would lead to perilous innovations, let them reflect again upon the evils of the existing system, and consider whether the dangers to be apprehended from change can possibly be more numerous and prove more disastrous than the actual mischiefs we are compelled to acknowledge and deplore.

A very simple remedy for the difficulties of our Pædobaptist friends here suggested, we think, would be, to adopt what Baptists hold as the gospel order, without any restrictions as to age:—first, Faith in Christ; second, Baptism; and third, Communion, Fellowship, and further Instruction: "Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you." With these conditions, we hold that the earlier the young are brought into the church the better. Such young persons,—having the prerequisite for baptism,—would thus truly become "the lambs of the flock."

The very point and top of resignation, is to submit quietly to the leading of God in the want of sensible support and comfort.