

From the least to the greatest

Pieter Gerrit Sinia

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VAN DE GEREFORMEERDE KERKEN IN NEDERLAND TE KAMPEN

From the least to the greatest

Children at the Lord's Supper

Paedocommunion in the Dutch Reformed Tradition

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1. Relevance of the topic

A first encounter with the topic of paedocommunion or infant Communion through theological encyclopedia², liturgical dictionary³, or even Wikipedia⁴ gives the impression paedocommunion is a practice with a long history. But paedocommunion has become and has remained a relevant topic over the last century. The Roman Catholic Church lowered the age of first Communion with the papal encyclical *Quam Singulari* of Pope Pius X in 1910. The discussion on – and the introduction of paedocommunion within protestant churches in the West and more specifically within the Dutch Reformed tradition began after the Second World War and continues until now. The discussion within the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands started in the sixties, and regained relevance in the recent process of merging with the Netherlands Reformed Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church⁵, as well as in new openness towards the practice within the more traditional wing of these churches⁶. The Reformed Church liberated of Rijsbergen welcomed children since 1961 or even 1960. There was some discussion in the sixties and seventies, before and after the denomination split into the Reformed Church liberated and the Dutch Reformed Churches. The issue remains relevant within the Dutch Reformed Churches as several local churches have put the issue on their agenda and have decided to welcome children at the Table in recent years. The issue has regained relevance within the Reformed Church liberated as the discussion started afresh and with new openness in the last decade or so. The decision of both denominations to work towards a reunification will in all likelihood give a new impetus to the discussion. The discussion within the Christian Reformed Church in North America started in the early fifties, but the final synodical decisions on the issue are of quite recent date. My research will focus on the Dutch Reformed Churches, the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands and the Christian Reformed Church. All in all it is my impression that the issue of paedocommunion is currently still relevant within the Dutch Reformed tradition.

² E.g. *Realencyclopädie für protestantische Theologie und Kirche*, s.v. "Kinderkommunion."

³ E.g. *The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy & Worship*, s.v. "Infant Communion."

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Infant_communion (accessed September 9, 2017).

⁵ Anna W. Zegwaard, *Als kinderen meevieren: Een onderzoek naar de discussie over kindercommunie binnen de kerken* (Gorinchem: Narratio, 2006), 13.

⁶ E.g. "Dr. Noordegraaf: Kind aan avondmaal denkbaar," *Reformatisch Dagblad* (August 24, 2007).
 "Kinderen aan het avondmaal? Een omstreken onderwerp," *Theologia Reformata* (March 2008).

1.2. Research Topic

It is my aim to give a comprehensive overview in this dissertation of the most relevant aspects of the discussion on and the introduction of paedocommunion within the Dutch Reformed tradition after the Second World War. This includes the case study of the discussion on and introduction of paedocommunion in three local congregations within that tradition. To provide relevant background I also intend to provide an overview of the history of paedocommunion prior to the Second World War, as well as an overview of the history of children and childhood in society and church. Together this will provide us with the material that will allow for systematic, practical theological reflection on the major themes and aspects within the discussion on and the introduction of paedocommunion, and arising from the paedocommunion praxis. I hope and trust that such reflection will contribute to the further development of Reformed doctrine regarding paedocommunion as well as the further development of Reformed paedocommunion praxis.

This leads to the following threefold research question:

1. What are the most relevant aspects of the discussion on, and the introduction of, paedocommunion within the Dutch Reformed tradition after the Second World War?
2. How does a systematic, multidimensional, and multidisciplinary interpretation of these relevant aspects explain the discussion on and the introduction of paedocommunion within the Dutch Reformed tradition?
3. How can the evaluation of these relevant aspects – in terms of coherence, validity of claims, and the accurate and consistent use of normative texts – contribute to the development of a Reformed paedocommunion doctrine and praxis?

Several sub-questions guide the way in which I will answer this threefold research question. I will formulate those sub-questions or guiding questions at the beginning of the chapters of this dissertation. Two major introductory questions deserve to be mentioned here as the answer to those questions will shape the two introductory chapters. These major introductory questions are:

4. What is the history of paedocommunion prior to the 1950s?
5. What is the broader history of children and childhood in society and church of which that history of paedocommunion was part?

1.3. Definition

I will use the term paedocommunion, as the more technical English term commonly used in the Reformed debate, as well as other less technical descriptions. I use the term paedocommunion to describe a spectrum of views and practices ranging from what has been called strict paedocommunion to what has been called soft paedocommunion. Cornelis Venema defines the strict position as that which favors the practice of admitting any baptized child of believing parents who is physically able to receive the Communion elements. The so called soft view favors the practice of admitting children to the Lord's Supper only at an earlier age than is customary among Reformed churches; that is before middle to late adolescence⁷. In the Dutch language '*zuigelingencommunie*', Communion of sucklings, can be distinguished from '*kindercommunie*', Communion of children, and some speak of '*gezinscommunie*', Communion of families. The latter term is often used in the same broad sense as paedocommunion. The German language knows similar distinctions⁸.

1.4. Scope of this Research

The focus of this study is on the discussion on and the introduction of paedocommunion within the Dutch Reformed tradition. I will limit myself by focusing on this tradition in the Netherlands and in North America. And I will further limit myself by focusing on the discussion and praxis within three denominations within this tradition, the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA), the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (RCN) and the Dutch Reformed Churches (DRC)⁹. The ecclesiastical fellowship or ecumenical relations between these three denominations are more than just a formal reason to treat these three denominations as a family of churches, representative of the Dutch Reformed tradition, even though there are relevant differences in theology, praxis and context¹⁰. The denominational scope is somewhat widened by the fact that the Dutch Reformed Churches

⁷ Cornelis P. Venema, *Children at the Lord's Table: Assessing the Case for Paedocommunion* (Reformed Heritage Books, Grand Rapids, 2009), 2f.

⁸ The German language also has one word for the Communion of sucklings, '*Säuglingskommunion*', a word for paedocommunion in general, '*Kinderkommunion*', as well as one word for Communion at an earlier age, '*Frühkommunion*'. See for example *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 3rd ed. s.v. '*Kinderkommunion*'. Similar in meaning to '*Kinderkommunion*' is the German word '*Kinderabendmahl*', though that word is less common than the expression '*Abendmahl mit Kindern*'. Cp. Eberhard Kenntner, *Abendmahl mit Kindern: Versuch einer Grundlegung unter Berücksichtigung der geschichtlichen Wurzeln der gegenwärtigen Diskussion in Deutschland* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlaghaus Gerd Mohn, 1980), 11.

⁹ I chose the translation Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (RCN) for the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (GKN), and Dutch Reformed Churches (DRC) for the Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken (NGK).

¹⁰ As indicated, I have been a member of all three denominations, and I have served two of the three denominations as a pastor.

originated from the Reformed Churches liberated (RCL) round 1967¹¹, and the fact that the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands merged with the Netherlands Reformed Church (NRC) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church into the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PCN) in 2004¹². I will pay secondary attention to denominations most closely related to these three denominations as far as such attention seems warranted¹³.

The case study of the discussion on and introduction of paedocommunion will involve three local churches: the Reformed Church liberated, later Dutch Reformed Church of Rijsbergen in the Netherlands; Fourteenth Street Christian Reformed Church in Holland, Michigan, in the United States of America; and First Christian Reformed Church of New Westminster, British Columbia, in Canada. Case studies and empirical research on local congregations within the Protestant Church in the Netherlands have already been performed by Anna Zegwaard¹⁴. As much as possible I intend to include the results of her research in mine.

In my study of the paedocommunion discussion within these three denominations I will limit myself to the national or bi-national denominational periodicals, and the handful of popular theological publications associated with these denominations¹⁵. Regarding the discussion on the floors of synods or national assemblies of these three denominations I focus on the discussion as it is described in the agendas and acts. I have mostly limited myself to the adult perspective on paedocommunion, while trying to be sensitive to all information about children's perspectives.

1.5. Survey of Research

My dissertation is not the first one on the subject of paedocommunion. Three earlier dissertations have been most relevant for my research. Eberhard Kenntner published his dissertation *Abendmahl mit Kindern* in 1980¹⁶. Similar

¹¹ I chose the translation Reformed Churches liberated (RCL) for the Gereformeerde Kerken vrijgemaakt (GKv).

¹² I chose the translation Netherlands Reformed Church (NRC) for the Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk (NHK), Evangelical Lutheran Church for the Evangelisch-Lutherse Kerk in het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden, and Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PCN) for the Protestantse Kerk in Nederland (PKN).

¹³ E.g. The Reformed Church of America, the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), the Canadian Reformed Church, the American Reformed Churches, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC), and the Dutch denomination of Christian Reformed Churches or Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken.

¹⁴ Zegwaard (2006).

¹⁵ There is limited academic discussion on the subject, and it is almost impossible to use the available academic discussion to shed light on the specific denominations or part of the Dutch Reformed tradition on which we focus.

¹⁶ Kenntner (1980).

to my dissertation Kenntner concludes a study on the discussion on paedocommunion and its historical roots, with laying the foundations of a systematic and practical theology of paedocommunion. But his focus is on the German Protestant tradition, and mine on the Dutch Reformed tradition. His research also presents a practical theological perspective, but my practical theological approach differs, among others, in the case study of three local congregations and in the use of empirical methods.

In 1987 Jo Hermans published his dissertation on the celebration of the Eucharist with children¹⁷. This impressive book of over eight hundred pages studies paedocommunion from the perspective of the science of liturgy. Similar to my dissertation it includes rich detail about the history of paedocommunion and about the history of children and childhood in society and church. But Hermans' focus is on the Roman Catholic Church, its theology and liturgical practice. My chapter on the history of paedocommunion not only concludes with a focus on the Reformed tradition, but even the earlier history is written with the Reformed paedocommunion debate in mind. My chapter on the history of children and childhood in society and church is written after further developments in the historiography of this specific part of history.

In 2006 Anna Zegwaard published her dissertation, presenting the results of her research on the discussion on paedocommunion within the three denominations which had just merged into the Protestant Church in the Netherlands¹⁸. That means that both our studies include research on the discussion within the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. But I had the advantage of standing on her shoulders, following up on her manual work in a more digitalized decade. Both our dissertations include case studies of local congregations using similar empirical methods. But with the choice to do my case studies in two other Dutch Reformed denominations I hope our studies will be complementary.

¹⁷ Jo Hermans, *Eucharistie vieren met kinderen: Een liturgie-wetenschappelijke studie over de deelname van het kind aan de Eucharistie in het verleden en volgens de huidige kerkelijke richtlijnen* (Brugge: Tabor, 1987). Translated into German as *Eucharistie Feiern mit Kindern: Eine Liturgie-wissenschaftliche Studie* (Kvelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 1991).

¹⁸ Zegwaard (2006).