

## Admission of Children to Holy Communion History & Some Thoughts

### THE PAST

Issues surrounding the Admission of Children to Communion before Confirmation are not new! Here is a quick flick through the past...

### THE EARLY CHURCH

There is no explicit mention of any special approach to baptism in the New Testament. Children were included with the family and household and initiated into the faith with the adults. Nor is there any mention of any baptised members being excluded from the celebration of the 'Eucharist'. The image we have of the early church enjoying Holy Communion together is that the sharing of bread and wine was part of a family meal open to all members of the church and their families of all ages. For children, as for anyone else, membership of the church was by baptism and depended on participation in the Eucharist.

In the 4<sup>th</sup> Century Apostolic Constitutions there is an order given for how people should receive Communion. First come clergy, then widows and deaconesses, then children followed by the main body of adults.

### THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD

During this period, baptism, confirmation and communion came to be seen as separate events for a variety of reasons.

**Augustine's doctrine** of 'original sin' encouraged the early baptism of infants to secure their future in heaven. Up until this period the Bishop was the minister of baptisms and the rite included the laying on of hands. As Dioceses grew, visits from the Bishop became infrequent, so local ministers performed the baptism with water and the signing of the cross. The laying on of hands at Confirmation, came later with the Bishop's visit. Admission to communion was still through baptism.

**In the eleventh century** controversy arose about Eucharistic presence. A by-product of this was that the church withheld the bread from children. Later it decided to withhold the cup from all lay people, so children had no way of receiving communion at all.

**1281 Archbishop Peckham** at the Council of Lambeth issued a regulation that those not confirmed (without good reason) should be barred from communion.

### THE REFORMATION

**Cranmer's Prayer Book** of 1549 stated that 'there shall none be admitted to the Holy Communion until such time as he can say the catechism and be confirmed'. This emphasised instruction and understanding the faith with personal salvation and commitment. Catechism classes before confirmation were not offered to small children. Thus Anglicans inherited the belief that children could not be admitted to communion until they had been instructed and confirmed. The 1662 Prayer Book however, shows that there was still debate over this issue and records a compromise saying, "And there shall none be admitted to the Holy Communion until such time as he be confirmed or *ready and desirous* to be confirmed."

Since the 1950s there has been a growing view in the Anglican church that baptism should be regarded as one complete rite of initiation and that children should be wholly and unconditionally welcomed at the communion rail with adults.

In 1971 The Ely Commission Report concluded that Baptism IS the complete sacramental rite, therefore children should be admitted to Communion on that basis.

In 1974 three Dioceses: Manchester, Peterborough and Southwark were given permission to admit children on an “experimental” basis.

In 1976 General Synod decided not to admit children, but in 1978 the Scottish Episcopal Church did decide to admit them.

After a number of reports and recommendations the Guidelines for Admission of Baptised persons to Holy Communion were accepted by General Synod in 1996.

The House of Bishops report states that, ***“The entire profession of the Christian life... is represented in the act of Baptism... In other words, baptism makes us full members of the Body of Christ.”***



#### **OTHER CHURCHES**

Although in the Church of England bread was withheld from children and wine was withheld from all laity, Orthodox churches continued and still continue to offer bread and wine to all-ages. In the Roman Catholic church it is usual to admit children to communion at around the age of 7.

#### **NOW IN THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND**

Each diocese may offer the option of children receiving communion before confirmation to churches. This diocese encourages churches to consider a range of issues. Certainly within your parish there will be people who have firm views on either side; it is important to hear these views. The diocese has guidelines for churches to follow to ensure that decisions are carefully considered, and due care is taken in communion preparation.

#### **SOME THOUGHTS WHICH MIGHT BE IN FAVOUR OF ADMITTING CHILDREN TO COMMUNION...**

- The whole family of the church worship and receive together, with children learning to behave appropriately.
- Children are welcomed and valued equally, not excluded from a key element of worship based on age.
- Many children, even those of an early age have a genuine faith, it is unreasonable to exclude them on the basis of a lack of understanding when we do not question adult members of the church about their faith.

- Children from other denominations where they receive communion can continue this.
- There is evidence to suggest that in the early church children were included in communion.
- Confirmation becomes a real declaration of an adult's decision to follow Christ. The teaching is based on discipleship rather than being able to receive Communion.

#### **DIOCESAN GUIDELINES**

The guidelines encourage churches to consider all relevant and important issues including consulting the PCC and congregation; developing suitable worship - words and liturgy; the age from which children will be admitted; parental involvement and ensuring that there are ways to include children with additional needs. A preparation course for both children and their parent/responsible adult will be required and in addition churches are also expected to keep a record of their decision and to review their Policy every three years.

#### **ADMISSION OF CHILDREN TO HOLY COMMUNION**

The Rite of Admission to Holy Communion before confirmation is an important occasion and should be set in a context of celebration. There is no fixed model for this, and different churches are free to develop their own approach. There is a suggested rite in 'Communion Worship: Christian Invitation' (CHP 2006). Other examples are given below:

- Hold a special service specifically for the children and their families
- Make the admission a key part of an all-age service
- Hold the admission at a special time of year (e.g. Easter)
- Involve the children concerned – choosing songs/hymns, speaking reading, etc.
- Use visuals and other attractive and suitable aids to worship
- Produce your own liturgy for the occasion, or use available outlines (SB can provide)
- Give the children a gift to mark the occasion (e.g. suitable Bible)
- Baptism candles can be used to provide the link between baptism and admission
- Encourage the children to choose mature Christians as sponsors

#### **SOME THOUGHTS WHICH MIGHT BE AGAINST ADMITTING CHILDREN TO HOLY COMMUNION**

A number of common and valid concerns are raised in PCC and congregational meetings when the issue of admitting children to communion is discussed. The below are comments that have been made, and an attempt to address them.

##### **'CHILDREN CAN'T UNDERSTAND'**

Some are anxious about Paul's words in Corinthians (1 Cor 11:29) where the Corinthians are warned about eating and drinking without recognising the body and therefore eating and drinking judgement on themselves. But this verse is in the context of Paul criticizing the Corinthians for taking Communion before everyone has arrived. His desire is for them to be "one body". No human has a complete understanding of Jesus's death for us – of course children do not have a full understanding, but neither do adults. Can we legitimately draw a line across levels of understanding?

##### **'THERE WILL BE NOISE AND DISRUPTION DURING THE EUCHARIST'**

Experience shows that this is not normally the case. Often the opposite is true as children who know that they are to be part of the celebration will concentrate and participate better. The presence of children reminds us that the origins of Holy Communion are embedded in the Passover, a family feast where children play an essential and valued role.

#### **‘CHILDREN DON’T WANT OR NEED THIS CHANGE’**

Really? How has this been explained to them? My experience is that children who have a faith in Jesus are cross that they are excluded from Communion to express this. Many children sink into a kind of despair – feeling that their feelings and ideas are consistently ignored and devalued by adults, at school, at home and at church; maybe their expectations are extremely low, we need to swim against the tide in this.

#### **‘CONFIRMATION WILL LOSE ITS PLACE IN THE PROCESS’**

This is an important issue. The role of confirmation is a topic of debate nationally. There is a growing sense that as children are admitted to communion, confirmation regains its rightful place as the time when a young person (or adult) makes a public confession of commitment to Christ and His church and receives the confirmation of the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands of the Bishop.

At the present time there is a real concern that many youngsters are confirmed and then quickly fall away. Anecdotal evidence suggests that children who have been admitted to communion before confirmation are likely to stay in the church after the move from primary to secondary education (when the church currently loses 70% of its children) and are more ready to treat confirmation seriously.

#### **‘CHILDREN SHOULD WAIT UNTIL THEY ARE OLDER’**

Yes, it is certainly true that in some issues children are encouraged to grow up too soon - maybe in the types of clothes they wear or the TV they watch (too much too young is not good). But is communion one of these issues? If we believe that communion is one way in which we can receive from God and can celebrate our trust in Him then surely this is not something we should have to wait for!

#### **‘I HAD TO WAIT – TODAY’S CHILDREN SHOULD TOO’**

This is an understandable statement, one often raised by older members of the congregation. If we take a step back, we shall recognise that during the past half century the church has lost the vast majority of two generations. The middle-aged among us who have remained faithful are the exception, not the rule. There are many factors contributing to this, but we must ask ourselves what part was played by the church’s attitude to children? One headteacher said ‘I was in church three times every Sunday singing in the choir. But no one ever took a scrap of interest in me as an individual’. This man, who met thousands of children during his career, became a strong atheist. Let us try to avoid the tragic mistakes of the past.

#### **‘THERE IS NO NEED FOR PREPARATION’**

This is an understandable reaction from those who think we should follow the Orthodox pattern of welcoming all, whatever their age. The preparation course is a means of reinforcing the importance of the elements and helps children think through their own faith at their own level. It may mean that children who receive at the Eucharist have a better knowledge than many adults – which might point to a need for basic teaching for everyone in the church.

#### **‘A CHILD MAY BE TURNED AWAY WHEN IN ANOTHER CHURCH’**

The regulations state that if a child received at their own church they should not be excluded from communion at a church where they are a visitor, whether that church allows its own children to receive or not.

#### **‘WE DON’T HAVE CHILDREN IN OUR CHURCH, SO THERE’S NO POINT CONSIDERING THIS’**

You may be a small community, perhaps in a rural area with few children. The important thing is to be prepared for that moment when, unexpectedly, a family walks through the door. A church that is ready and welcoming is far more likely to keep that family than one which is not. Considering the question of admitting children to communion is part of the process of getting ready. Don’t leave it on the shelf – you would not decide you don’t need fire insurance because you’ve never had a fire!

**‘THIS COULD BE DIVISIVE, SO WE’RE AVOIDING IT’**

This is one of a number of pastoral issues that may be raised. The bottom line for the Church of England is that ‘Baptism always precedes admission to Holy Communion’ (House of Bishops Guidelines 1997). In such situations, great sensitivity will be needed for the church to move forward together, whichever way the decision on admitting children to communion goes. There will need to be time for honest discussion, for empathy, and for much prayer. The experience of other parishes that have faced similar issues may be helpful. Many of these issues appear when members of the congregation are from other church traditions and have not fully understood the meaning of baptism and communion within the Church of England.

**‘PARENTS/CARERS MAY NOT UNDERSTAND WHAT THE CHILDREN ARE DOING’**

This is a pastoral issue, and each case may need careful consideration. In many cases the ‘responsible adult’ in church is Grandparent or friend’s parents, and their role could be vital in helping the child develop in their faith. Many of the courses of preparation for communion include at least one session for parents or other responsible adults who will be supporting the child through this process.

This [link](#) to the Church of England website may be useful

Please [contact Sarah Brown](#) for further help and advice.

Sarah Brown, Children’s Adviser