

Admitting Children to Holy Communion

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The Church of England has been running an experiment in admitting baptized children to Holy Communion before they are confirmed. The doctrine set out in I Corinthians 11 has to be offset against a number of pressures existing in today's Church.

1 A Major Change

For a number of years now a few of the Church of England's dioceses have been running an experiment. Parishes in those dioceses have been able to seek and obtain the bishop's permission to admit children to receive holy communion years before they are confirmed. Each parish is free to make specific requests to the bishop and patterns vary a great deal. Some parishes are seeking admission to communion for their children from the age of seven, others from the age of ten.

Various safeguards are put in place. In particular the parishes must keep a register of children so admitted and the children are told that this permission will lapse if they have not been confirmed by a certain date or age (for example by their sixteenth or eighteenth birthday).

Various commitments are made, in particular one from the bishop who grants permission: that the child who has been admitted to receive communion in one church will never be refused communion in any other Anglican church. This is the same commitment made to children in those Anglican provinces overseas which grant this sort of permission.

What this means is that there are considerable numbers of children in this country who have received such permission from an Anglican bishop or on the bishop's behalf. They and their families have been led to believe that they have a right to receive communion in any Church of England church and that the minister or PCC may not refuse them. You or your minister may already have come across such a child.

Some people in the Church of England have been campaigning for this permission to be allowed in all dioceses and this is now starting to happen. The House of Bishops recently agreed a set of guidelines to regularize this process throughout the Church of England. These guidelines have been presented to General Synod for information as to what the bishops are saying and doing but they have not been debated or agreed by the synod.

Several of the guidelines are eminently sensible: for example that baptism should always precede admission to holy communion, that a register should be kept of those so admitted, and that the incumbent should ensure the use of good teaching material for the children involved (see the Appendix: Guidelines agreed by the House of Bishops - c, g & h).

One of the guidelines is less obviously right and will cause problems for many clergy and parishes. The first part of paragraph j reads:

No baptised person, child or adult, who has once been admitted to Holy Communion and remains in good standing with the Church, should be anywhere deprived of it. When, for example, a family moves to another area, the incumbent of the parish they are leaving should contact their new incumbent to ensure that there is no confusion regarding the communicant status of children.

Quite clearly this means that the incumbent to whose church the family moves, or a new incumbent moving to a parish where children have been admitted may not refuse communion to any child who has the bishop's permission to receive.

2 What is Really Going on?

There are a number of reasons for the move towards admitting children to receive communion. These include: ecumenical pressures, the parish communion and family communion movement, the decline in the number of older children and teenagers attending church and being confirmed, a wrong understanding of how communion works, the rapid spread of a strange and unbiblical doctrine of infant baptism, a consequent loss of confidence in confirmation, and a wrong use by bishops of their authority. Understanding these reasons will help us see whether or not the changes we are seeing are really right.

i Ecumenical Pressures

The Roman Catholic Church confirms children at about the age of seven or eight but its normal practice is to admit them to communion about a year before confirmation. Many Anglican families have close contact with Catholics and there are many mixed marriages or otherwise mixed families. Churchgoing children whose friends or half-siblings have been admitted to communion are naturally going to ask 'Why not me?'

ii Parish Communion and Family Communion

Very many parishes now have 'Parish Communion' (with children present for part or all of the service) or even 'Family Communion' as their main or only Sunday service. When children see the adults receiving bread and wine, and especially when they are taken forward for a blessing, it is obvious that they are going to ask why the grown-ups should receive but they should not. Unless the minister and the parents are confident in the reasons they give the system will soon begin to fall apart.

iii Decline in Numbers of Children and Teenagers at Church

The statistics make horrifying reading. Whether we look at church attendance, Sunday School or teenage teaching group numbers, or confirmation registers the same pattern is seen. There has been a huge decline in church attendance by children and teenagers over the last 50 years. Even those children who do attend are more likely to give up much earlier than was the case not so many years ago. Many parishes are trying to rectify this situation and one of the theories being tried out is that if children are more involved in church life they are more likely to stay. For many churches the primary indicator of people's involvement is their receiving communion, so it seems to make sense to let the children receive in the hope that their commitment will be strengthened and they will stay.

iv A Wrong Understanding of How Communion Works

Despite over four centuries of our Protestant Prayer Book there is a very commonly held view of communion in the Church of England which really goes back to medieval Catholicism. It says that Christ himself is present in the communion elements, the bread and wine. This is not the same as the Roman doctrine of transubstantiation but is a half-way stage to that view. Often called 'The Real Presence', this idea inevitably implies that receiving the bread and wine actually benefits us, strengthening our faith or our unity or both. In fact, as the Bible insists, receiving unworthily, without true repentance or adequate preparation or a proper understanding, does more harm than good. Cranmer and the other Anglican reformers believed in a more biblical doctrine sometimes described by contrast as 'The Real Absence'. Christ is received by faith when we receive the elements rightly but in no sense can he be said to be present in or alongside the bread and wine.

When people believe in 'The Real Presence' they think that receiving communion is itself a good thing which will bring blessings. Thus it makes all the sense in the world for them to want children to receive communion before they are tempted to stray away from church. The benefits of communion, they believe, might well hold the children in the faith.

v A Strange and Unbiblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism

It is often said these days that baptism is complete and full initiation into the church, the family of God. In the *ASB* service the congregation says to the newly-baptized infant: 'We welcome you into the Lord's Family' which is fine as long as we understand that the expression 'Lord's Family' means here the visible church, the congregation of Christ's people. But then the welcome continues, 'We are inheritors together of the kingdom of God' which makes the unjustified leap of assuming that God's inner work of salvation has already happened in the child's life. It is important to keep separate in our minds the idea of the visible church, the congregation of God's people, and the idea of the invisible church, those (mainly within the visible church but certainly fewer in number) who are truly converted by the inner work of God's Holy Spirit. Baptism makes you a member of the visible church but not of the invisible. When we say that baptism marks our full initiation we are very near to the error of thinking that the baptized are the converted.

But there is another problem with the idea that infant baptism is complete initiation. Whenever infant baptism has been allowed in the Church of England, whether through the Prayer Book or the *ASB*, there has been the insistence that the child on reaching 'years of discretion' should be confirmed. Adult baptism signifies two things: God's grace shown in his promise of forgiveness and eternal life for those who trust in Christ, and our faith response to his grace by which we actually receive what is promised. Infant baptism only signifies God's grace, not the child's response. It is therefore incomplete, partial or provisional initiation. Full membership of the family of God only comes when we respond, verbally and publicly, to the grace of God.

The New Testament is very clear on this point in regard to baptism (and also to the equivalent Old Testament sacrament of circumcision):

A man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. (Rom 2:29)

Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 2:38)

The 'outward and visible sign' of the sacrament means nothing without the 'inward and spiritual grace'. That principle is seen in these and other Bible passages, and is made explicit in the Prayer Book Catechism. Thus baptism performed without the public faith and repentance of the one baptized can only be seen as provisional and partial.

The baptized infant should be seen as a welcome but probationary member of the church, not as a full member. Only with confirmation (or some similar institutional declaration of a mature and thought-through faith) does the membership become complete.

vi A Consequent Loss of Confidence in Confirmation

When church people start thinking that baptism marks full initiation into the people of God they soon come to the conclusion that confirmation is simply a ritual which should be judged by its current usefulness. Clearly confirmation is not holding young people in the church, or bringing them in, so its usefulness is open to question. Added to that is the confusion caused by the (right in my view) open table policy which allows unconfirmed but communicant members of other churches to receive communion as our guests. If we hear on the one hand that baptism is all you need to be a full church member and on the other hand that an unconfirmed Methodist is free to receive communion with us, what on earth is the point of confirmation? This soon becomes a vicious circle because if confirmation has no point, fewer and fewer people are going to bother with it which, in turn, further emphasizes that it is a thing of the past.

vii A Wrong Use by Bishops of Their Authority

This next point is a difficult one to make and will not be well received by all! Over recent years there have been a number of examples of Church of England bishops overstepping their authority. (I do not deny that the same is true of some parish ministers and PCCS, but they are not relevant to the issue at stake here.) Bishops are allowed to suspend livings, putting in a 'priest in charge' who can be moved at any time instead of allowing the patron to nominate a vicar or rector to serve indefinitely; but they are only allowed to suspend if they and the diocese have plans for pastoral reorganization such as merging two or more parishes. Yet in recent years there have been a number of cases of bishops suspending with no such plans in existence and occasionally of bishops automatically suspending all parishes which become vacant in their diocese. Similarly some bishops have overstepped the mark by insisting on ordinands wearing stoles at the ordination service when the rules clearly state that they should have the choice of the traditional reformed preaching scarf instead. This present case of admitting children to communion before confirmation marks at least one and probably two further abuses of episcopal authority.

It is doubtful whether bishops really have the authority to admit unconfirmed children to communion. Canon Law (B15A) allows those who are 'ready and desirous to be so confirmed' (not just 'desirous' as it is often misquoted), and allows baptized but other unconfirmed people to be admitted 'under regulations of the General Synod' but does not allow bishops to admit those too young to be confirmed.

The Bible raises a very big question over all this with its insistence that whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord: 'A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognising the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself' (1 Cor 11:27-9).

The self-examination required, and the seriousness of the whole matter as Scripture portrays it, strongly suggest that only those capable of a mature understanding should receive the bread and wine.

But if it is doubtful whether bishops have the authority to admit unconfirmed children to communion it is absolutely certain that they do not have the authority to force clergy or churches to admit to communion those prohibited by Canon Law or by the doctrine of the Church as found in the Prayer Book or by the Bible. In fact the Bible, the Prayer Book and Canon Law make it clear that any such instruction should be resisted.

3 What is Wrong with Children Receiving Bread and Wine?

There are strong arguments in favour of admitting children to receive holy communion. These include: (a) the link between passover and communion taken with the fact that children, at least those old enough to eat meat, shared in the passover meal; (b) the idea that baptized children should be brought up in the fellowship, including the communicant fellowship of the church; (c) the parental wish for their children to join with them at what is often called ‘the church’s family meal’.

Against those arguments several others must be weighed.

i Paul’s warning in 1 Corinthians 11:27-9, dealt with earlier, has to be taken into account. It is necessary and a ministerial duty to protect those who may be within the visible church but are not truly reconciled and submitted to God from the serious consequences of receiving unworthily.

ii We must also consider the parallel between baptism and circumcision, the equivalent sign of admission to the old covenant. It is important to note that neither of them automatically produces faith nor conveys grace and that neither of them has any value without our faith and God’s grace:

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love... Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation. (Gal 5:6; 6:15)

The Old Testament Jews had been tempted to see circumcision alone as a sufficient mark of being the people of God – just as some today see baptism in that way. But Jesus and Paul both make clear that without faith circumcision (and its parallel, descent from Abraham) does not make you a child of God (John 8:31-59), Rom 3-30, etc). Clearly we must understand the same of baptism. The idea that baptism admits you to the kingdom of God, the mystical or invisible church, is precisely the heresy for which Jesus condemned the Jewish leaders in John’s Gospel and Paul so strongly attacked the Judaisers in Galatians. The admission of baptized but unconfirmed children to holy communion is a practical outworking of that heresy today.

iii It may not be helpful, and may indeed be misleading, to think of holy communion as a ‘family meal’ or ‘fellowship meal’. Granted, it is to be shared in fellowship and it does remind us of a very special meal in the life of Jesus and his disciples. But we are not called

to share the passover meal itself (roast lamb and various trimmings), and Paul warns against the abuses which can arise if the church turns communion into a meal:

When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you for this? Certainly not! (1 Cor 11:20-2)

The point is not that these abuses will arise in every church and situation but that the Lord's Supper is precisely not a meal: it is quite possible, and is Paul's command in the case of Corinth, for the church members to eat their meal at home and to see the Lord's Supper as something different. There may be a warning here against the growing tendency to combine communion with '*agapé* meals'. There is certainly a strong argument against the view which says that children who share at home in the family meals should share at church in this family meal.

In a number of churches already parents are encouraged to give their children some of the bread, or part of the wafer, they have received. In other churches this happens without explicit encouragement by the clergy, but a convenient blind eye is turned. Clearly this may be one way of allowing the two views to be reconciled, and it may be the right way forward in some churches. But it raises another problem: the decisions and discipline of the local church should mean something, and this way out of a difficulty simply encourages or allows individualism to flourish and church discipline to wither. The Bible expects us to be far more fellowship-minded and less individualistic than most of us are today. Indeed Paul's warning about the need to recognize 'the body of the Lord' (1 Cor 11:29) may be referring, at least in part, to the fellowship, unity and common life which we enjoy as members of one church. Within that common life it is dubious at best to allow some parents to break the church's discipline.

The whole question of admitting children as communicant members actually arises because we have got our priorities wrong. In recent decades we have followed society in becoming much too human-centred and childcentred. Of course individual people matter: God made each of us, he knows each one, he longs for all to be saved. But the breakdown of society, its norms and institutions, is now being seen in the churches. Tragically in this case it is church members and leaders, following the spirit of the age, who are wanting to elevate personal feelings and preferences above the institutions and disciplines which God has given for our good.

One irony of the bishops' present proposals, which may well show just how ill-conceived they are, is their insistence that the permission to receive communion will lapse if the young person has not been confirmed by the age of 18. How absurd that the church should be withdrawing permission, barring from the Lord's Table, at just the age when society is giving permissions, treating people as adults, and welcoming them to full membership. The illogicality of this is another argument against the whole scheme as proposed.

It would be more logical, if we believe that children should be admitted to communion much younger, to go the Roman way and confirm them young. That would still be wrong, for all the reasons outlined above, but it would at least be consistent. It would also lead us into the Roman situation, with even fewer teenagers and young adults active in the life of their

Church than are present in the Church of England, and far fewer than are present in those Anglican churches which take youth work seriously. Much better would be to wait until the mid teens for confirmation, and to restrict communion to those who have been confirmed.

4 How Should we Respond to all This?

Here are some recommendations to various groups in the Church of England.

House of Bishops

i Realize the very strong opposition there will be if parishes are told to go against their principles on this issue: if you stick with the present guidelines you will be asking a considerable number of clergy to go against their consciences and what they have always believed the church and the Bible to teach;

ii Bring this whole subject (not just its practical outworkings) to Diocesan and General Synods for debate;

iii Change the guidelines and the promise given to children to make clear that permission to receive in one parish does not imply permission everywhere, but that each parish has the right to stick to the traditional teaching and policy of the church if it so wishes. It is not too much to ask children and their families to understand that this is an experiment, conducted in certain parishes only, and not a change in the doctrine and practice of the whole church.

Clergy and/or PCCs

Make clear to your bishop now (politely but firmly) that you oppose the admission of children to communion, and that you are standing firm by the traditional teaching and policy, so will not be able to admit children to communion even if they have been admitted elsewhere.

All of us in the Church of England

Look hard at the issues which lie behind this move towards admitting children to communion. Be prepared to re-think attitudes and practices which have developed in recent years but which may not be biblical or helpful. For example:

i Be more confident that Anglicanism has traditionally been right, rather than looking to Rome or elsewhere to see how things should be done.

ii Look very hard at the whole question of Parish Communion and Family Communion. The people of this country, not least its young people, need more non-sacramental services, services where the Bible is clearly taught, services where all are welcome and can be helped to faith. Each parish should have at least one such service every Sunday.

iii Observe and learn from the fact that the parishes which are keeping their children and teenagers or bringing more in are in most cases those which do not have communion as their main service every Sunday.

iv Get back to a biblical, reformed and Prayer Book doctrine of the Lord's Supper. We receive Christ by faith even if we cannot receive the bread and wine in our mouths (Prayer Book rubric following the service for the Communion of the Sick). There is no automatic

blessing in the communion: indeed there are severe warnings for those who receive when not properly prepared.

v Understand again that infant baptism is only partial initiation, and remember the vital distinction between membership of the visible church (the baptized) and membership of the invisible church (the true people of God).

vi Reinstate confirmation as a requirement for receiving communion, insisting that a public profession of faith is necessary to complete Christian initiation. Keep it in the mid or late teens so that those involved can be taught the faith at an appropriate level for adult church membership.

vii Honour the bishops for their high office as the senior pastors of our Church, but respectfully remind them that they and their decisions are subject to the Bible and to the Church's own rules. Nobody is free or should be asked to go against what they believe the Bible to teach and only the General Synod may change the Church of England's discipline in matters for which the Bible does not legislate.

Appendix

Admission of Baptized Persons To Holy Communion Before Confirmation

Guidelines Agreed By The House of Bishops

a Since 'communion before confirmation' is a departure from our inherited norm, it requires special permission. After consultation, every diocesan bishop will have the discretion to make a general policy whether or not to entertain new applications for 'communion before confirmation' to take place in his diocese. If he decides to do so, individual parishes must seek his agreement before introducing it. The bishop should satisfy himself that both the incumbent and the Parochial Church Council support any application, and that where appropriate ecumenical partners have been consulted. If the parties cannot agree, the bishop's discretion shall be followed.

b The incumbent must ensure that the policy adopted for his/her parish is clearly and widely understood. The policy should be considered within the general context both of the ministry that is carried out in the parish through initiation, and also of the continuing nurture of people in the Christian faith. The bishop should be satisfied that the programme of continuing Christian nurture is in place leading to confirmation in due course.

c Before admitting a person to communion, the priest must seek evidence of baptism. Baptism always precedes admission to Holy Communion.

d There is question of regarding age at which children may be admitted to Holy Communion. In general the time of the first receiving should be determined not so much by the child's chronological age as by his or her appreciation of the significance of the sacrament. Subject to the bishop's direction, it is appropriate for the decision to be made by the parish priest after consultation with the parents of those who are responsible for the child's formation, with the parent's goodwill. An appropriate and serious pattern of preparation should be followed. The priest and parents share in continuing to educate the child in the significance of Holy Communion so that (s)he gains in understanding with increasing maturity.

e The Church needs to encourage awareness of many different levels of understanding, and support the inclusion of those with learning difficulties in the Christian community. Particular care needs to be taken with the preparation of any who have learning difficulties, including children. The incumbent should consult with those concerned in their care, education and support regarding questions of their discernment of the sacrament, their admission to Holy Communion, and their preparation for confirmation.

f Before a person is first brought to Holy Communion, the significance of the occasion should be explained to him/her parents, and marked in some suitable way before the whole congregation. Wherever possible, the person's family should be involved in the service.

g A register should be kept of every person admitted to Holy Communion before confirmation, and each should be given a certificate (or, better, the baptismal certificate should be endorsed).

h Whether or not a parish practises 'communion before confirmation', the incumbent should take care regarding the quality of teaching material, especially that used with children and young people. The material should be reviewed regularly and the advice of diocesan officers and other professional advisers taken into account.

i The priest must decide exactly how much of the liturgy communicant children will attend. Even if there is a separate 'Ministry of the Word' for children, anyone who is to receive Holy Communion should be present in the main assembly at least for the eucharistic prayer.

j No baptized person, child or adult, who has once been admitted to Holy Communion and remains in good standing with the Church, should be anywhere deprived of it. When, for example, a family move to another area, the incumbent of the parish they are leaving should contact their new incumbent to ensure that there is no confusion regarding the communicant status of children. It is the responsibility of the new incumbent to discuss with the children and parents concerned when the children should be presented for confirmation. Such children should normally be presented at least by the age of eighteen.

k Since baptism is at the heart of initiation, it is important for the bishop regularly to be the minister of holy baptism, and particularly at services where candidates will be both baptized and confirmed. It is generally inappropriate for candidates who are preparing for initiation into the Christian life in baptism and confirmation to receive baptism at a service other than the one in which they are to be confirmed.

l In using rites of public re-affirmation of faith other than baptism and confirmation, care should be taken to avoid the impression that they are identical with confirmation. In the case of people who have not been confirmed, it will be more appropriate for the incumbent to propose that they be confirmed.

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