

**Admitting Children to Communion before
Confirmation:**



An exploration!



Introduction

For many the above words will be received with a sense of relief. For others they will be received with a sense of fear. This paper has been written because the Church of England has taken the decision to allow children to be admitted to communion before Confirmation. Rather than enforce a blanket instruction for all parishes to follow, the Synod has decided that each diocese and parish should decide for themselves at this stage whether they wish to implement this change. As a result, most dioceses have decided that it is an appropriate way forward and consequently many parishes have already begun to put in place positive changes to allow children to receive communion before they have been confirmed.

Recently the Diocesan Synod here in Worcester has revisited the General Synod motion and all parishes in the diocese have once again been encouraged to further explore whether they would be willing to admit children to communion before they have been confirmed, if they have not already done so.

At the open PCC meeting in March, all those present heard a presentation from the Diocesan Children's Officer, Emma Pettifer, on some of the basic elements which had convinced many in the Church of England that admitting children to communion was the right thing for the Church to be doing in the twenty-first century. This focused mainly around how there is now a greater understanding of children's developmental processes and how there has been a sociological and psychological repositioning of children in our society in recent decades. Emma also discussed the Bishop of Worcester's stance along with practicalities that needed to be considered. Many at that meeting were thankful that these areas had been covered well by Emma. To further aid and inform their decision making, however, many expressed a wish to know more about the theological and historical perspectives to the debate. This paper therefore aims to fill in some of those gaps so that each DCC member will be better able to discuss the issue from a more informed perspective. There will be a PCC vote later in the year to decide how the Team Ministry wishes to proceed.

Much of what follows is written in a question and answer format in the hope that it will make it clearer, more immediately relevant and easier to follow. It is hoped that all who are involved in deliberating this issue will be able to come at it with an open mind, willing to allow oneself to understand the history of this complex subject area and what may be contributing influences today.

Sacraments

- 1) What are the sacraments, how many are there and what is special about them?

A sacrament is often described as 'a visible sign of invisible grace instituted for our justification'.¹ As such, a sacrament bestows 'infused' grace upon the believer in a tangible form. This takes place all at once through the priest's actions, prayers, blessings and the

¹ W. Addis & T. Arnold, *A Catholic Dictionary* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench and Trubner & Co, 1917), p.742

sacramental elements. The Holy Spirit is present in all places, at all times, but the human make-up is such that we need to be able to physically discern the Grace of the Spirit in order to live it out in the world. God gives us the sacraments precisely for this purpose, to enliven our faith and rejuvenate our mission in the world. Different traditions of church differ on their understanding of how many sacraments there are. Being the *via-media* or middle way, and acknowledging both its catholic and reformed credentials, Anglicanism recognises seven sacraments, Holy Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Eucharist, Penance (confession), Anointing the Sick, Holy Orders and Holy Matrimony.

Of these, two are often considered in Anglicanism to have been ordained specifically by Christ since they may be explicitly found in the Gospels: Holy Baptism² and the Holy Eucharist.³ The others are only implicitly found in the New Testament documents. Thus, Holy Baptism and the Holy Eucharist are considered to have been ordained by Christ as necessary for our salvation.⁴

Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist

- 2) Has there ever been a time when the Church has allowed children to receive before Confirmation?

Yes. Up until the Council of Trent in 1545 the official stance of the Western Church was to allow all baptised persons to receive. In fact, until about one hundred years before the Council of Trent it was actively encouraged on account of the child's spiritual wellbeing.

- 3) What was the Early Church's practice?

We know that Jesus was baptised in the river Jordan by John the Baptist.⁵ There also seems to be evidence from scripture and the early letters of the Church that very early on in the Church's history whole families were baptised; adults and children together.⁶ Baptism became the entry point into the Church and the life of the worshipping community, this included partaking of the Holy Eucharist.

Originally, Baptism was a full rite of passage (the only one to be found in the New Testament). Earliest manuscripts show that three main elements were common to initiation into the Early Church; a water bath, anointing and a Eucharist.⁷ Those who had just been baptised would have fully participated in the Eucharistic Feast there and then! Some local

² Mt. 3:13-17; Mk. 1:9-13; Lk. 3:21-22; Jn. 1:29-33

³ Mt. 26:17-30; Mk. 14:12-25; Lk. 22:7-23; 1 Cor. 11:23-26

⁴ For a more in-depth discussion on the sacraments in Anglicanism see: S. Sykes, J. Booty, J. Knight (Eds.), *The Study of Anglicanism* (London: SPCK, 1998)

⁵ Mt. 3:13-17; Mk. 1:9-13; Lk. 3:21-22; Jn. 1:29-33

⁶ Acts 16:33; Acts 2:38-39; 1 Cor. 1:16; 1 Cor. 7:14; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 2:22:4; Hippolytus, *The Apostolic Tradition* 21:16; Origen, *Commentaries on Romans* 5:9; Origen, *Homilies on Leviticus* 8:3; Cyprian of Carthage, *Letters* 64:2 & 5;

⁷ A. Richardson & J. Bowden, *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1983), pp.299-300; M. Reardon, *Christian Initiation – A policy for the Church of England* (London: Church House Publishing, 1991), p.14; M. Dalby, *Infant Communion: The New Testament to the Reformation* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2003), pp.4-14

customs may have had teaching as a part of adult preparation for baptism, but this is not clear and it was certainly not a prerequisite for the initiation of children. In fact, the Early Church had a high appreciation of learning being continual and maturing in the faith being a process which took a lifetime and beyond.

4) Why was it considered necessary for things to change?

Up until the twelfth century the importance of children being a full part of the Church's life grew. More and more children partook in the Holy Eucharist as it was considered desirable for their spiritual wellbeing on the basis of John 6:53, 'unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you will have no life in you'.

Then priests began giving children all children un-consecrated bread and wine or simply refusing to communicate them through fear that infants would spit out the consecrated elements and so sin against Christ's sacred body and blood. Slowly the practice of children receiving communion began to diminish,⁸ and Baptism became separated from the Eucharist. The Western Church finally abolished infant communion at the Council of Trent (1545-1563). It should be noted that the Eastern Church followed no such path and continues to communicate infants to this day.⁹

5) When did Confirmation materialise?

Confirmation first became a common post-baptismal rite in the West during the 9th Century to mark believers' maturity in the faith and their commitment to personal development and continued life-long learning.¹⁰ It was very much later when the West decided to associate Confirmation with receiving one's first communion. The East has never followed such a path and children in Eastern churches continue to receive from baptism.

6) When did it start to be associated with receiving communion?

As a consequence of the Council of Trent's decision (1545-1563), Confirmation became the prerequisite for receiving communion in the Western Church. Aside from its natural role as an acknowledgement of progress and learning in the Christian faith, Confirmation acquired a role, that it was never designed to have as a ceremony for admission into Holy Communion. After communicating unconfirmed children from its very foundation, the Western Church decided to change its stance.¹¹ Consequently, over time Confirmation began to lose some of its emphasis as a statement of intention and progress on behalf of the believer.¹² Instead it became, in the minds of many laity, a ceremony to mark one's receiving of First Communion.

⁸ M. Dalby, *Infant Communion*, pp.21-24

⁹ See *Ibid.*, p.26

¹⁰ The General Synod, *Admission of Baptised Children to Holy Communion Regulations 2006*, www.cofe.anglican.org/info/education/children/childrencommunion.doc, 2006

¹¹ General Synod Board of Education Working Party, *Communion Before Confirmation* (London: CIO Publishing, 1985), p.10

¹² H. Davis, *Moral and Pastoral Theology Volume 3: The Sacrament in General, Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Eucharist, Penance, Indulgences, Censures* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1935), p.71

Following the Reformation, learning took on a slightly different emphasis in this regard and the Church began to see faith as a staged process. Such learning was quickly attached to Confirmation and the sense of it declaring a commitment to a life-long developmental journey diminished. Many believe that with this change in developmental understanding, much of the integrity was removed from the Confirmation rite. As a consequence, there remains much theological confusion over exactly what the Confirmation rite is.

For the post-reformation Church, one had to prove one's learning in order to be seen as a true believer and the Confirmation ceremony became the recognition that this learning had been achieved. Thus, because Confirmation had already become the rite for entry into receiving communion, following the changes imposed by the Reformation one could not receive communion unless they had undertaken the necessary degree of learning first. This approach remained pretty much unchallenged in the Church of England until the middle of the twentieth century.

One question we should ask ourselves is, do we really still believe that people should be excluded from communion without first being educated? What does such an approach say to those who are incapable of meeting the mark?

7) Has the Church changed its approach to learning in recent years?

Drawing upon the essence of Disciple, which literally means 'one who learns', in recent times the Church seems to have rediscovered the value of the Early Church's understanding of faith being a process and not a one off event or experience. Thus, it is recognised once again that the baptised commit to life-long learning culminating at their death when they shall see all that God has promised through Jesus in the life of the Spirit. There has also been a rediscovery of what it truly means for baptism to be the initiation rite into full membership of the Church and many now believe that it is inconsistent to recognise baptism this way and then limit full participation for other reasons. Similar to the understanding of the Early Church, the Church today has again begun to see Communion as more of a part of that development and less as an ultimate goal. We learn more every time we partake of the Eucharistic feast because participation is by far the most effective method of learning. This all makes the traditional stance surrounding Confirmation difficult to uphold with integrity.

Present Day Concerns

8) What factors in society encouraged the Church of England to re-assess its position?

In the latter part of the twentieth century, the age demographic of those coming forward for Confirmation in the Church of England began to rise sharply. What was once a rite for young teenagers soon became a rite for adults (many past middle ages). There is a whole host of possible explanations for this which we do not have the space to explore here, but during the same period, however, the numbers of candidates for Confirmation dropped substantially as did those attending church on a regular basis under a certain age.

With fewer young adult churchgoers, the Church is now unable to rely on society to encourage and nurture youngsters in their faith as it once did. Retention of youngsters has also become much harder (just look at the average age profile of most congregations). The effectiveness of the Church of England's traditional approach is clearly now limited.

Furthermore, many in the Church hope that allowing admission to communion before Confirmation will once again free the Confirmation rite to regain something of its own identity and integrity as a rite of learning and intent. Many believe that Confirmation should be about the believer making a statement, saying; 'having been a full member of the church for some time, I take my discipleship seriously, I have begun further deepening my understanding and I intend to continue this for the rest of my life!' It would also return Baptism's place as the rite granting full membership into the Church.

Added to this, many believe that allowing children to become more fully engaged members of the Church family during its central service, the Eucharist, will help to make children feel a more valued and accepted part of that body. This will, it is hoped, help with retention over the longer-term. Recent research has shown that most of those children who do attend church will cease to do so when they begin college or leave home. Figures show that currently many do not return to church as adults because of childhood memories of exclusiveness and division. By allowing children from a younger age to fully participate in the mysteries of the Eucharist, their endearing memories of church may well become more positive and seeds might just be sewn that will encourage more to return to church during adulthood.

9) What is the practice of other churches?

For the Eastern Orthodox Church and for many reformed churches there has never been a bar placed on who can receive communion. In these traditions, it is left up to the parent to decide when a child should begin receiving.¹³ This is because the Eucharist is seen as an important part of what the whole church community does and children are recognised as a valuable part of that community. In 1905, the Roman Catholic Church also began allowing children to receive before Confirmation, returning to the practice of five centuries earlier.¹⁴

The Church of England debated the subject of communion before Confirmation for many years before finally putting forward its proposals to admit children to communion before Confirmation in 2006.

10) What would happen to the special place of Confirmation for the initiation and teaching of youngsters in the faith if they were not required to be confirmed in order to fully partake in the Eucharist?

¹³ See M. Dalby, *Infant Communion*, p.26

¹⁴ H. Davis, *Moral and Pastoral Theology V3*, p.74

The Eucharist should never be used as a bargaining tool! Wherever possible the Eucharist should be a mechanism for peace and unity which transcends human divisions along lines of gender, race, social background or age. Although there are many examples in our universal Church and in society where such divisions seem to be upheld, the Church should always be a source for unity, not division. Consequently the Church must always endeavour to make the Eucharist a source for uniting community. It is difficult to see as anything other than sin, occasions when the Church does not manage this. So, if the Church truly recognises its youngsters as 'valued' members of the family and considers them the bedrock of the Church's future (which they are), to withhold the sacrament from these 'valued' younger members on any basis seems questionable.

Be this as it may, many have real concerns over where all this leaves Confirmation. Confirmation in many parishes is an occasion for real celebration and if this occasion were to be lost, some fear that it might be detrimental to the Church's yearly cycle.

Confirmation in its present form, however, is somewhat muddled in its theology and purpose. Leaving aside the place of communion in this discussion, a good number of those in authority in the Church of England have recognised the need for the Confirmation rite to be reformed for a good many years. Many theologians have expressed much frustration at the lack of clarity over the role and purpose of Confirmation as a rite. As these individuals have rightly pointed out, the past situation of only allowing individuals to receive after they have been confirmed is a primary factor in the muddling understanding of, not only Confirmation, but also Baptismal and Eucharistic theology. If proposed changes to when one can receive communion helps bring clarity to the role of all three of these very important rites then such changes are surely necessary for the future health of the Church. If a change to the current structure is considered the right thing to do for the sake of the Church community, its witness to the world and for the future health of the Church then it is difficult to see why it should not be advanced. Not to do so would only continue to cause damage to the Church body.

That is to say, one has to take seriously the possibility that the way in which Confirmation has been used in the Church since the Reformation may have confused its role in an unhelpful manner. There are strong grounds for releasing Confirmation from its present shackles so that it may once again become a valued rite marking a believer's maturity of faith, knowledge and commitment to life-long learning.

11) What is wrong with the traditional approach, aren't children the same as they have always been?

In many people's view, what the traditional approach seems to undermine is children's important role in the liturgy, in the Church and in the world. Society today recognises essential qualities reflected in children's lives that adults no longer exhibit. As adults we build up much baggage, much of which we fail to understand ourselves. This baggage often

obscures the way we perceive mystery, symbolism and the way God interacts with the world. It is often this baggage that causes adults to erect barriers around societal or political divides, because of fear for personal safety and a desire for control. Such fears are not nearly so acute in children.

The qualities that we see in children only really began to be appreciated in the 1970's (which may be why the previous approach continued to be effective up to this period). It is understandable why many of us who were born before this period struggle with the far reaching consequences of this development. The reality is, however, that society now recognises that the qualities children bring to any gathering often transcend social barriers of sex, race, class, language and even time. In a church that is so often torn apart by political, societal and theological difference, the inclusion of these unifying qualities in the liturgy is surely essential and something it cannot afford at this time to ignore.¹⁵

Furthermore, until the middle of the twentieth century, the Church modelled itself on the bustling vastness of the empire. Today, however, the Church claims to model itself on the all inclusive family; a family that meets around the table. If children are prevented from sitting around this table whenever the feast is shared, for whatever reasons, the Church has surely failed in its endeavour and is failing to live up to its own standards. Many modern families expect their children to be fully included and participating members of whatever the family engages in. Society happily accepts this in the majority of instances. This seems to be taken as a psychological absolute to security and stability of the family network. One only has to look in the media to see that the Church already struggles to overcome a perception of it being exclusive, divisive, controlling or even oppressive. Many believe that, if the Church excludes children from its central act of worship and devotion in today's social setting, then it is likely to send out even more of the wrong messages.

12) Does the New Testament lend anything to the debate?

There seems to be very little in the New Testament which calls for children to be excluded from any Church undertaking, especially not worship or the sacraments. Nowhere in the Gospels does Christ even imply that children are not as worthy of full membership in divine matters as adults. 1 Corinthians does suggest that receiving in an unworthy manner is sin; '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). One has to recognise, however, that this is as true for adults as children. If we are honest, there may well be many occasions when we have not been quite worthy to receive. Indeed we rarely are. All the same, there are very few Sundays when many arrive at the communion rail for a blessing rather than to receive on account of their unworthiness. Indeed, how many of us would be left if we did?

¹⁵ For a deeper discussion from this perspective see: D. Holton, *Infant Communion – then and now* (Bramcote: Grove Books, 1990). pp.23-24

Even so, however one may interpret it, this passage from Paul in no way implies that children are any less able to receive worthily than adults. In fact, if we look at other parts of the New Testament, quite the reverse seems to be true. In the Gospels, there is a real sense in which children are the ones who perceive the truth most acutely.

In Matthew 18:2-6, we get: 'He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, 'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. 'If any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.

In Matthew 18:10: 'Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven.

And in Matthew 21:15-16: 'But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, 'Hosanna to the Son of David', they became angry and said to him, 'Do you hear what these are saying?' Jesus said to them, 'Yes; have you never read, "Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself?"

In Mark 9:36-37, we hear: 'Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'

And in Mark 10:13-16, we read: 'People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, 'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.' And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.'

All this leaves us with one question; 'if children were so welcomed into the presence of the incarnate Christ, then what justification can we have for excluding them from partaking of His presence at the Eucharist?'

13) How can a young child gain enough learning to understand what they are participating in?

As discussed in earlier chapters, the concern with learning grew very much out of the post-reformation attitude that one must attain to a certain level of understanding before being fully admitted into the Church community. The difficulty with this approach is that it seems

to be built on a false premise and has little justification in either scripture or the earlier traditions of the Church.

The nature of the Eucharist is such that it conveys elements of a shared communal meal, a re-presented sacrifice of Jesus' *eternal* sacrifice and a memorial of his death. It looks forward to future things, incorporates the present and looks back to what has been. During the Eucharistic prayer the veil between heaven and earth is thinned and the priest finds themselves operating at the interface between the human and divine realms: at that place where the human concept of time and the timelessness of God meet. The Eucharistic liturgy gives us a foretaste of the heavenly banquet as we engage on some level with the eternal worship of heaven.

All of these elements are present at any one given moment during the liturgy. On top of this, the salvific nature of the Eucharist is such that even the most learned individuals fail to comprehend its enormity: it is simply impossible to fully understand such things in this lifetime. We know the Eucharist is very special, but don't quite have the ability to fully grasp or describe how. The Eucharist is a mystery; a mystery of grace and love. Given that this is the reality for adults, is it fair to bar children because of their apparent inability to understand? Furthermore, if we bar children under this premise, then we surely have to do the same to any who are unable to make the grade. Should we then also enforce this for adults who we do not consider have enough 'learning' and should we also refuse those with learning difficulties who in our opinion are unable to fully 'understand'? If we limit it for one group it is surely inconsistent and rather disingenuous not to do so for all?

Either way, it seems clear that children and adults with learning difficulties often respond far better to mystery, suspense and divine encounter than the average adult does. Children, on the whole, do not carry the secular baggage of many of their companions of more advanced years. This gives them the ability to overcome the needless distractions and falsities that so often plague the adult mind during times of prayer and reverence. It is a simple truth that children seem to have few inhibitions when it comes to prayer and reverence and children's prayers often seem to possess an originality and integrity far beyond the capabilities of many adults. The majority of General Synod voted in favour of this proposal for good reason. Many believe that there is the real possibility that in receiving communion beside children at the Altar rail, adults might actually learn something themselves about divine encounter...

As followers of Christ and as the Established Church in this place, we have a duty to nurture and educate our children in the ways of Jesus Christ for the good of their moral grounding and spiritual wellbeing. Just as we recognise the need to educate our children in science, mathematics, literacy and technology (all human constructs) we also have a responsibility to help them grow closer to their creator and redeemer. Some outside the Church may take issue with this, but then that is why they are outside the Church. We have a responsibility to pass on the faith to new generations and to enable them to grow in the sacrament and the word. Then when our children grow into adulthood they will have the tools to make an informed choice. If they then choose to turn away from the Church they will be doing so

from an informed perspective, just as those who decide that they would rather be an accountant than a writer would do after receiving a good education in English and Mathematics. Currently we only give our children a tiny piece of the picture, the human piece. The encounter with their God through the divine ordinances of the Holy Eucharist we deprive them of. They never get a chance to reap the spiritual rewards or to feel that the Church and the Eucharist is as much theirs as ours. We say that we wish to welcome children, but then exclude them from the most central and spiritually enhancing part of our church life. We make it look like a private club for adults. Through the Eucharist we receive the infused sacramental grace of God which brings us closer to Christ and enhances us in the faith. Few of us understand this fully, but we know it to be the case. Is it morally, theologically, psychologically or sociologically right to exclude this from our children? Do they not deserve to receive the same grace too?