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Children and communion:
theological and historical
perspectives

A paper by Rt Rev'd Stephen Cottrell, Bishop of
Chelmsford

To share communion with children as they journey towards the decision to live as disciples of Christ is to give them the spiritual nourishment they need, to honour our Lord's command to let the children come to him, and to celebrate the truth that we are full members of God's church not because of our age, position, or intellectual understanding of the faith, nor even our readiness to live as disciples, but because of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

Children and communion: Theological and Historical Perspectives

A brief theological and historical paper by the Right Reverend Stephen Cottrell, then Bishop of Reading

The aim of this brief paper is to lend theological support to the idea that, given suitable guidelines, children may be welcomed to the Holy Communion.

The baptism of infants began very probably in the time of the apostles, when whole households were baptised following the conversion of the head of the family (cf. Acts 15). It was a natural, inclusive development of the Jewish practice of circumcision (cf. Colossians 2:11 & 12). Infant baptism is universal by the time of Irenaeus (c.180 AD) and explicitly ordered by Hippolytus at the beginning of the third century. By the time of Cyprian (c.250 AD) and certainly by Augustine (late fourth century) the practice of infant and children participating in the Holy Communion was firmly rooted in the North African Church.

As for confirmation, evidence suggests that up to the time of Augustine this rite was combined with baptism. This is, of course, the practice of the Orthodox Churches to this day. Nor did it completely disappear in the West. Queen Elizabeth I received both sacraments together as an infant. However, by the 16th century it was normal for the two rites to be administered separately, a situation perpetuated by the Reformers. Confirmation seems to have been regarded by Cranmer as a test of the believer's understanding of the meaning of Communion. This is toned down somewhat in 1662 version of the Prayer Book where such preparation and testing is prior to and independent of confirmation itself. Nevertheless, confirmation was clearly seen as the appropriate "certificate" which admitted the bearer to communion. The rubric which allows "those desirous of being confirmed" is little more than a grudging concession, introduced to take pastoral accounts of the rare visits of the bishop!

Cranmer, however, placed as much emphasis on instruction as

he did confirmation; hence there is plenty of evidence to suggest that between the 16th and 19th centuries many people were admitted to communion after instruction but still before confirmation

It was in the 19th century, and greatly influenced by the Oxford Movement, that confirmation again took on a more sacramental significance, such that it became linked to baptism as a further act of initiation. Consequently most Christians growing up in the 20th century believed that confirmation before communion somehow completed initiation and was an unchanging pattern that dated back to the early church. This brief historical tour shows a much wider variety of practice.

In the 20th century two further developments in our understanding of the church encouraged a review of our understanding of initiation and the Eucharist. First, was the introduction of the parish communion. More and more the Eucharist came to be the main Sunday morning service in the Church of England. Gradually the practice arose of bringing children to the altar rail for a blessing. This was no doubt prompted by the heartfelt desire to include children as part of the Christian family at one of its most solemn and joyous moments. But the head was also engaging in the issue.

The second development – or better termed a re-discovery – was of the centrality of baptism in the Christian life. The 1944 report *Confirmation Today* dismissed the idea that baptism and confirmation represented two different levels of membership. Following the Lambeth Conference 1968, Anglican churches in New Zealand and North America began to admit unconfirmed children to the Holy Communion. In 1971 the *Ely Commission on Christian Initiation* recommended to General Synod

- I. The Church should make explicit its recognition of baptism as the full and complete rite of Christian Initiation.

- II. It should be permissible for the parish priest, at his discretion, to admit persons to communion (if they so desire) who have been baptised with water in the name of the Trinity.

General Synod chose not to adopt these recommendations, but that did nothing to stifle the growing debate. In 1980 the Alternative Service Book made the strong suggestion that baptism is neither a temporary nor partial measure. It included the following in the baptism rite:

Priest: God has received you by baptism into His church

All: *We welcome you in the Lord's family etc.*

This of course is strongly echoed in the Initiation Services of Common Worship which present Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist as a single rite of initiation, which is then separated for pastoral more than theological reasons. The prayers of welcome at baptism make the same strong affirmation that initiation is complete in the baptism itself and its meaning and relevance unwrapped in the laying on of hands and anointing, which have come to be the signs of confirmation, and in the receiving of Holy Communion. But these liturgies now implicitly acknowledge that although adults coming to faith will participate in all three elements of initiation at a single service, for children baptised in infancy, it is just as likely; that they will be admitted to communion prior to their confirmation.

In 1982 the much acclaimed document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* was published by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches at Lima. The Lima Document (para 14) was polite but firm when it suggested that:-

“Those churches which baptise children but refuse them a share in the Eucharist before such a rite (i.e. confirmation) may wish to ponder whether they have fully appreciated and accepted the consequence of baptism”.

The Knaresborough Report of 1985 *Confirmation before Communion?* proposed sweeping changes in the practice of admission to Communion, based on a thorough study of the theology and history of Christian initiation. The report rejects firmly what it calls “sectarian groups who operate a strictly

controlled membership policy and who manage clearly the borders between the Church and the world". Its recommendations were clear and specific.

- that baptism with water, in the name of the Holy Trinity, is a complete sacrament of Initiation into the Body of Christ;
- that confirmation is not an absolutely necessary prerequisite for the admission of persons to Holy Communion;
- that it is desirable, both for clarity of principle and for effective pastoral practice, to permit the admission of baptised persons to Holy Communion, before Confirmation;
- that Confirmation should remain in the Church of England as a sacramental means of grace to accompany an adult profession of faith.

In recent years both General Synod and the House of Bishops have given serious thought to the issue of communion before confirmation. In 1996 a clear majority of bishops declared themselves in favour of further carefully monitored experiments in this area. In 1997 General Synod (GSMisc.488) gave its approval to the guidelines. At this time only three dioceses in the Church of England were admitting children to communion before confirmation – Peterborough, Southwark and Manchester. By the time this was reviewed in 2005 there were only four dioceses that were not, and across the Church of England 1,650 churches were now sharing Holy Communion with unconfirmed children. This review led to the new General Synod Regulations which came into force on the 15th June 2006 under paragraph (c) of Canon B15A and these are now fully incorporated into the procedures outlined in this document.

A Theological Perspective

So much for a bird's eye view of history. But our theology must also be clear if our pastoral practice is to be true to Scripture as our inheritance of faith. For Christians the starting point of our understanding of God's nature, and of his dealings with the world, is the person of Jesus, supremely in his incarnation,

death and resurrection. The pivotal point of our understanding of Jesus (and this is clearly seen in all our Gospels) is His suffering and death. Those who seek to follow God by following Jesus must share in His death and resurrection if that discipleship is to have any meaning (cf. Matthew 16:24). Baptism is the effectual sign of our identification with Jesus in His death and resurrection (Romans 6:3 and 4). It speaks, not only of a new beginning, but also of a changed lifestyle (Romans 6:5 – 7).

We have already noted that the early church practised infant baptism from an early date. They believed, as does most of the church today, that this is not disproven by scripture. Rather it is the intention of the teaching of both Old and New Testaments. This is not disputed. However, what is challenged is the view that the newly baptised child is a Christian in the full sense and that baptism is the complete rite or sacrament of initiation.

There is of course a strong element of New Testament teaching, which demands individual repentance and faith as necessary for a proper appreciation of all that is offered embryonically in baptism. No one would wish to deny that. The crucial question for us however is whether in the case of baptised children such a response is a prerequisite for admission to communion or whether it follows on naturally from it. Put slightly differently, do we have to 'deserve' communion by displaying a proper understanding and appreciation of it in advance, or can we receive it as a gift of God's grace – just as we receive baptism? It is not unlike the debate on the related issue of inter-communion in our relationships with, say, the Roman Catholic Church. Should we regard the shared Eucharist as the goal of our pilgrimage, or may we not legitimately partake of it now as food to sustain us on our shared journey.

We believe that it is the grace of God, lavished freely upon us, that requires an inclusive approach to the issue of children and communion. Of course, as adult Christians we put a high priority on the use of our God-given intellect, and rightly so. But

a grasp of all the theological subtleties can never be a prerequisite for receiving the grace of God. If, as is generally agreed, the Lord's Supper is a means of receiving God's grace, why should those who by baptism are within the covenant family be denied this blessing? Good pastoral practice suggests that children and young people who are already members of the church should be cherished and nurtured. We believe that an equally good theological case, derived from the nature of God in Christ, clinches the matter. Baptism is also entry into the life of the church, which is also the sacramental life. If we make the primacy of baptism the starting point for our theology then the discussion should really be the other way round: are there any good reasons why baptised Christians who are full members of the church should not receive Holy Communion?

Slowly but surely this view is taking hold in the Church of England, and as it becomes accepted, many are understandably anxious about the future of confirmation itself. Will it wither away altogether? The introduction to Common Worship Initiation Services says that "Baptism is a reality whose meaning has to be discovered at each stage of a person's life". Therefore the reality of baptism that is Holy Communion, and fellowship around the Lord's Table, is received at an age determined by the pastoral practice of each church, following the guidelines contained here. The reality of baptism which is about our own mature and considered turning to Christ is something that can be experienced and celebrated in confirmation.

There are many ways of helping adults explore and discover their Christian faith and this in turn can lead to an adult profession of faith, either in confirmation or in an affirmation of baptismal faith. Gradually confirmation will cease to be seen primarily as entry into communion, or even entry into the church (a sort of membership ceremony), but as a mature readiness for "active service". In other words, not the final chapter of church allegiance but the next chapter in committed discipleship. To share communion with children as they journey towards this decision to live as disciples of Christ is to give them the spiritual

nourishment they need, to honour our Lord's command to let the children come to him, and to celebrate the truth that we are full members of God's church not because of our age, position, or intellectual understanding of the faith, nor even our readiness to live as disciples, but because of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. This is freely lavished upon us in Baptism, nourished through Holy Communion, and lived out through the course of a lifetime - re-discovered and re-appropriated as we journey with Christ. "We love because he first loved us." (1 John 4. 19)