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Communion before Confirmation

A Response to 'Admitting Children to Holy Communion' in *Churchman* 113/4 (1999)

Alan Ward

Introduction

As Vicar of a parish which has recently agreed to admit children to holy communion before confirmation, I am fully in favour of the introduction of this policy into Anglican church life. It is a practice which I have been supporting and arguing for over the past twenty years, and it has been an enriching experience to be involved in the preparation of children and young people for their first communion last autumn.

I am aware that many who share my evangelical tradition disagree with me, as do many from others traditions. I was not surprised, therefore, to find an article in *Churchman* arguing against the new practice (although not attributed at the time, I gather it was written by Donald Allister, and I refer to the article by his name). The present article is a kind of plea to *Churchman* readers to realize that not all biblical Christians agree with Allister, and that the practice of welcoming children and young people to the Lord's Table before confirmation does have merit.

Reservations

When our PCC and wider church fellowship debated this issue, we raised a number of problems with the way the policy was introduced. Firstly, does the house of Bishops have the authority to make such decisions, thus bypassing General Synod? Secondly, is it right to say that, once a child has been admitted to communion in one parish, he or she cannot be refused admission in another? On the latter, one of our PCC members commented that, had the same approach been followed over the ordination of women priests, PCC's would now have no right to refuse a woman priest, once ordained, to minister in their parish! I understand and go along with Allister's problems with these institutional issues.

I also have to agree with him that Anglican liturgy is now embracing a 'real Presence' doctrine (see, for instance, many of the *Common Worship* post communion prayers). This is to be regretted and resisted, and points to the

importance of teaching biblically and, where necessary, ‘vetting’ the official texts for parish use.

So far, so good. However, I want to raise a number of question marks against Allister’s reasons why he believes the practice is unacceptable, and then to defend a view of the sacraments which, I believe, makes sense of the practice.

Social Context

Allister cites social pressure as one reason why this practice has been introduced. Now no one needs me to tell them that the church’s social context is constantly changing! The rules of the BCP with regard to communion were appropriate in a country where everyone was baptized, and therefore there was a need to limit access to, and therefore abuse of, holy communion. Hence the requirement of confirmation in adulthood before admission was possible. Today we have an ‘opt-in’ culture, which means that those who are baptized and are regularly part of a worshipping community (two of the qualifying factors) are making a conscious choice to do so and are already demonstrating a response to God at one level or another.

Tradition

Allister also blames ecumenical pressure for the change. I agree that ecumenical influence can be a bad thing, such as the unwelcome Roman elements in the *Common Worship* lectionary (Maryan festivals, etc). But we have to admit that our Anglican traditions are far from perfect, and sometimes we have to make changes if we are to be more faithful and biblical in our practice and doctrine. Interestingly, the article ‘Lay Administration of the Lord’s Supper: A Change to Stay the Same’, featured in that same edition of *Churchman*, makes a point similar to this. Sometimes these changes are informed by traditions other than the Anglican one.

Children

We then move on to the thought that churches only feel the need to get their young people more involved in church life because clergy are increasingly desperate not to lose them altogether. I do not believe that the trend to involve young people in worship at a younger age is necessarily a panic measure to try and hold them. Put more positively, it is a recognition that

Christian children and young people are part of the church of today and have gifts to use for the edification of the body of Christ. In Scripture, there is no indication that the gifts of the Spirit are limited to certain age-groups (Joel 2:28).

Peer Pressure

Finally, Allister attributes the new policy to 'peer pressure'. This seems somewhat unfair. Yes, children do ask 'Why them and not me?' But our experience is that families come to their own decisions about these matters and some have decided to wait for confirmation, therefore excluding their children temporarily from communion. Also, younger siblings may still have to wait, and since there is no necessity to stick to an actual qualifying age, there need be no expectation that a child will automatically be admitted simply because he or she has reached that age.

Baptism: Full Initiation?

Integral to this whole debate is the question of the meaning of baptism: is it full initiation, or is it partial, waiting for completion at confirmation? We must recognize that it is not only the *Alternative Service Book* which uses 'realistic' language about the baptism service. The *Book of Common Prayer* also uses language which might be taken to suggest a doctrine of automatic baptismal regeneration. However, baptism remains the only biblical and dominical sacrament of initiation: if we believe it right to administer it to infants (and I do so believe), then we are wrong to call it 'partial initiation'. We all recognize that it is not a passport to heaven – it is still awaiting the personal response to Christ necessary for salvation. But baptized and worshipping children are full, albeit young and still maturing, members of the body of Christ. As such, I believe we have no biblical warrant to deny them participation in the Lord's Supper.

It has always seemed strange to me that in the Church of England we baptize and confirm adults, even when both take place at the same service! This is clearly implying that baptism alone is not full initiation, even when the person baptized is making an adult Christian profession! It is time we challenged this 'sacramental' understanding of confirmation, and accept baptism alone as the sign of full initiation into the Church.

Communion: A Meal?

The other half of the sacramental debate, of course, relates to the meaning of holy communion. It seems rather strange that Allister denies communion is a meal.

Of course, it is not a meal which nourishes us physically, but it is called the ‘Lord’s Supper’, a title which draws together many biblical strands about Jesus eating with sinners, the last supper, God inviting us into fellowship with himself, Christ ‘eating with’ the one who opens the door (Rev 3:20), the foretaste of the heavenly banquet, and so on. All this language from the Scriptures, echoed in the *Book of Common Prayer* and *Alternative Service Book*, means we definitely do consider it to be a meal, however symbolic. So, arguments which speak of allowing young believing family members to share in the family meal seem to me to be perfectly valid. Yes, communion is more than a family meal, but it is a family meal nevertheless.

Allister also suggests that the apostle Paul banned the practice of *agape* meals altogether. I’m not so sure. It seems, rather, that he was guarding such meals from abuse by encouraging those who wanted to truly share a meal to do so in the right spirit and telling those who only wanted to satisfying their own hunger to stay at home (1 Cor 11:33-34).

Eating and Drinking: Worthy or Unworthy?

What does it mean to receive communion ‘worthily’? It would be invidious to suggest that worthy reception means ‘full intellectual understanding’. If that is the case, who could claim to understand fully the depths of that simple act of receiving what Jesus called ‘my body’ and ‘my blood’? Such an approach would bar many mentally disabled people, or those with learning difficulties, from ever ‘worthily’ receiving communion. If, however, ‘worthy reception’ means a remembrance of Christ’s death, personally trusting that he died for me, knowing by faith that he is alive in me and among his people, and living at peace with God and neighbour – then age is hardly relevant. Each person is capable of grasping those truths by faith at his or her own level, and may grow in understanding of mind and appreciation of heart throughout their lives.

One of my own children has been welcomed to the Lord’s Table in recent months at the age of ten, and I am clear that at her own level she has for a number of years grasped what it is about. Her younger sister has not yet been

admitted, because both she and we as her parents know she is not ready. But that is to do with her spiritual immaturity, not necessarily her age.

Discipline

It is not always recognized that baptism is not the only condition for admission to communion before confirmation. There is also the need for parental consent, the requirement to be regular at Sunday worship, adequate preparation (good quality courses should appear over the next few years), and in the end the agreement of those running the preparation course, including the incumbent.

Confirmation

What, then, of confirmation? My view is that, with confirmation separated from admission to holy communion, we are free to promote it as a point of entry into responsible adult membership of the church. As such, we have stated in our parish policy that the minimum age for confirmation should be sixteen, this being the age at which someone is able to be on the electoral roll. Contrary to the opinion of some, I do not expect it to become obsolete. Rather we can now focus on the real purpose of confirmation: a clear adult profession of faith for those baptized as infants.

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