



27. Why Do We Have To Be Confirmed As Well As Baptised Before Taking Communion?

In New Testament times and for the next few centuries there was just one process of initiation by which you became a Christian. Anyone who was baptised, adult or child, was accounted a Christian and could receive the Eucharist. The Bishop of the town would preside at the service, which took place every Easter, after a rigorous course of preparation and fasting during Lent. Whole families were baptised at a time, including children. Tertullian, writing about 190 - 200 AD, commends the baptism of infants because they may at once start receiving the Eucharist.

A change of practice took place in the West (but not the East) due to the size of the dioceses in the lands north of the Alps. It was just not possible for the Bishop to preside at every Baptism in his Diocese.

Parents did not like to defer baptism of infants until the Bishop was in the neighbourhood (which might not be for years), particularly with the growing breakdown of society and high infant mortality. But the presence of the Bishop was still thought necessary to 'confirm' the rite of baptism. Confirmation, it was reasoned, 'strengthened' the Holy Spirit, implanted at Baptism, in the person on whom it was bestowed. However, confirmation was then not a prerequisite for receiving communion.

Problems arose because some parents simply neglected to have their children, once baptised, confirmed at all, even if the Bishop was available. Directions were given in England in 1281 that those who had not received confirmation should not be admitted to communion unless they had been unavoidably prevented from doing so.

After the Reformation, there was a further change of emphasis in England. Cranmer was much influenced by a school of thought among the reformers, which held that to be effective, a sacrament must be understood by those who received it. So small children, lunatics and simpletons became in effect excommunicate.

Before being presented for confirmation, a candidate had to know the Catechism - questions and answers setting out the basis of the Christian faith, that were printed in the Book of Common Prayer.

However, the difficulty of travelling still prevented confirmations from being held frequently, and it was not till the mid-19th Century that what we regard as our traditional order of events - Baptism, Confirmation, Communion - came to be strictly enforced. This did not matter too much, because in the greater part of the Church of England, to receive Communion more frequently than once a month was very much of an exception; the regular services were Morning and Evening Prayer.

A change came over the churches with the growth from 1950 onwards of the Parish Communion movement. A Communion service rather than Morning Prayer came to be regarded as the main daily service every week. Children were thus excluded from full participation in the key act of worship.

Confirmation, which had usually taken place at 16, began to take place at 12-14 - when youngsters are at their most unsettled stage and most influenced by peer pressure. This did not turn out to be a great success - all too often, it became a 'passing-out' ceremony and many Churches began to look for other ways to ground young people in the Christian faith more effectively.

A Commission headed by the Bishop of Ely considered the whole question of 'Christian Initiation' in 1972 and gave its view that Baptism itself implied full membership of the Church as Body of Christ. Confirmation, they thought, should be considered as a rite of commissioning or strengthening the young adult Christian for serving Christ in the world. It need not be a prerequisite for receiving communion, which was the sacrament of nourishment and growth in the spiritual life.

After much debate, the General Synod voted to accept the report and to give individual Bishops a discretion to admit to Communion before Confirmation, for adults as well as children. Meanwhile a similar process in the Methodist Church had concluded that in Wesleyan theology the reception of the Eucharist was a means of grace and so a part of conversion, which is a gradual process. Young people should not be excluded - local churches should have discretion either to admit

young people to Communion before full membership, or to lower the age of reception into membership.

In St Albans Diocese, the Bishop eventually ruled that children over the age of 7, the age when, he said, they develop 'moral awareness' might be admitted to Communion. The child must want to receive, and the parents must agree. A parish that wishes to implement this change must provide a course of instruction for the children and their families on the basics of the Christian faith.

Confirmation will still take place at 12+, and the Bishop will consider instituting a separate service of commitment for young adults. Adults may receive before being confirmed if they commit themselves to proceeding to confirmation.

At St Mary's, the United Council has voted to begin to look into the desirability or otherwise of the proposed change. As part of the process, it is proposed that there should be a series of talks in Advent looking into the meaning of Baptism, Confirmation, the Eucharist and the nature of the Church. All will be invited to take part.

After a full consideration of the issues, the United Council will take a further vote to decide whether or not to apply to the Bishop of St Albans for permission to move to the new pattern. The Staff, Stewards and Wardens are at present inclined to favour taking this step, but it can only be a success if people are prepared to support it wholeheartedly.