

Communion of Baptized Adults

Background paper form the Faith and Order Commission

1. Introduction

1.1 This paper will first of all set out the Church of England's current policy concerning admission to Holy Communion. It will then describe the history and theology underlying this policy. After that it will explain what is being proposed in the Bradford motion. Finally it will consider the theological implications of this proposal.

2. The Church of England's current discipline

2.1 There are currently six categories of people who are admitted to Holy Communion in the Church of England under Canon B 15A:

- Members of the Church of England who have been confirmed according to the rites of the Church of England – B 15A.1(a)
- Members of the Church of England who are ready and desirous to be so confirmed – B 15A. 1(a)
- Members of the Church of England who have received episcopal confirmation through unction or the laying on of hands in other churches. – B 15A.1(a)¹
- People who are baptized and communicant members in good standing of other Trinitarian churches – B15A.1(b)
- Anyone who is baptized and who is in immediate danger of death – B15.A1(d)
- Baptized children who are covered by the Admission of Baptized Children to Holy Communion Regulations 2006 issued by the General Synod – B.15A.1(c).

3. The history and theology underlying this discipline

3.1 There is nothing laid down explicitly in the New Testament about who may be admitted to Holy Communion, but the context of the descriptions of Holy Communion in Acts 2:41-47, 1 Corinthians 10:1-22 and 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 implies that those who took part were all baptized believers. In Acts it is those who respond to St. Peter's sermon with repentance and faith and are baptized who take part in the breaking of bread in Acts 2:42 and in I Corinthians those addressed in chapters 10-11 are those who 'call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ' (1Corinthians 1:2) and who were baptized into the one body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13).

3.2 In the account of Church order in the *Didache*, which is dated to the second half of the first century, it is laid down as rule that only the baptized may be admitted to Holy Communion² and in his *First Apology*, which dates from the middle of the second century, St Justin Martyr explains that

...no one is allowed to partake but the man who believes that the things we teach are true, and who has been washed with the washing that is for the remission of sins, and unto regeneration, and who is so living as Christ enjoined.³

3.3 The approach set out in this quotation is the one that is universally reflected thereafter in those sources from the Patristic period that refer to admission to Holy Communion. During this period Christian initiation involved a process of catechesis in which people were instructed in Christian belief and behaviour and this was then followed by a rite of baptism which included an affirmation of faith and of Christian commitment, and then, and only then, were people admitted to communion.

¹ This category covers those confirmed in the Roman Catholic Church by a priest acting on behalf of the bishop and using chrism blessed by him and those who have received chrismation in Orthodox churches, again using chrism blessed by a bishop.

² *Didache* 9:5

³ St Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 66

3.4 In the Western Church the rite of baptism was completed by the laying on of hands and/or anointing with the oil of chrism by the bishop with a prayer for the bestowal of the sevenfold gifts of the Spirit of Isaiah 11:2 At the turn of the first millennium this concluding part of the rite became separate from baptism and came to be seen as the separate sacrament of confirmation by means of which those who had been baptized received strengthening through the Spirit to live the Christian life.

3.5 At the Reformation, the Church of England retained both the separate rite of confirmation and the rule laid down by Archbishop Pecham at the Council of Lambeth in 1281 that confirmation must precede admission to Holy Communion. However, as chapter three of the new FAOC publication *The Journey of Christian Initiation* explains,⁴ the English Reformers gave a new focus to confirmation.

3.6 Although they held that confirmation was not one of the two dominical sacraments,⁵ they nevertheless maintained the traditional view that it was a means of grace in the sense that it was a means by which people were strengthened by the Spirit. This view is expressed in the prayer by the bishop before confirmation in the *Book of Common Prayer*:

Strengthen them, we beseech thee, O Lord, with the Holy Ghost the Comforter, and daily increase in them thy manifold gifts of grace; the spirit of wisdom and understanding; the spirit of counsel and ghostly strength; the spirit of knowledge and true godliness; and fill them, O Lord, with the spirit of thy holy fear, now and for ever.

3.7 However, as the rubric attached to the end of the *Prayer Book Catechism* explains, they also followed the practice of the Continental Reformation and made confirmation the conclusion of a process of Christian formation in which those who had been baptized as infants would be instructed in the basics of the Christian faith.

3.8 The English Reformers held that this process of formation and the laying on of hands for the strengthening power of the Spirit at confirmation needed to precede admission to Holy Communion because they took seriously the tradition going back to St Justin that not only the act of baptism, but also Christian belief and godly behaviour were a necessary pre-condition for the reception of the sacrament.⁶ The stipulation that only those who had successfully gone through the process of Christian formation leading to confirmation and had received prayer for the strength of the Spirit should be admitted to communion was intended to ensure as far as was humanly possible that this pre-condition was met.

3.9 The reason why the English Reformers were concerned that this pre-condition should be met was that they held that receiving the sacrament could never be a spiritually neutral event. While it was spiritually beneficial to those who received it worthily, it was spiritually dangerous to those who received it unworthily, bringing down upon them the judgement of God as St. Paul taught in 1 Corinthians 11:29-32.⁷ Pastoral responsibility therefore meant doing everything they could to bring about worthy reception and insisting that confirmation should precede communion was an integral part of this pastoral strategy.⁸

3.10 The rubric at the end of the Confirmation rite in the 1552 *Book of Common Prayer* laid down the absolute rule that : ‘there shall none be admitted to the holy Communion, until such time as he can say the Catechism, and be confirmed.’ The Church of England’s present discipline is a result of the subsequent qualification of this rule in four ways:

- First, in 1662, pastoral provision was made for those who had not been able to be confirmed during the Commonwealth period by means of the rule in the revised *Book of Common Prayer* that those who were ‘ready and desirous to be confirmed’ should be admitted to communion.

⁴ P. Avis (ed), *The Journey of Christian Initiation* (CHP 2011).

⁵ Article XXV

⁶ See the exhortations before communion in the *Book of Common Prayer* and the Homily ‘Of the Worthy Receiving of the Sacrament’ in the *Second Book of Homilies*.

⁷ See the exhortations before communion and Article XXIX.

⁸ It should be noted that ‘worthy reception’ does not mean that the person concerned is worthy to receive the grace offered in the sacrament. All who receive the sacrament are unworthy sinners. It does mean that he or she receives the sacrament in an appropriate manner with understanding, faith and penitence for sin.

- Secondly, following on from Resolution 42 of the 1930 Lambeth Conference, it was agreed by the Convocations in 1933 that baptized communicant members of churches not in communion with the Church of England could be admitted to Holy Communion in the Church of England on an exceptional basis. Following the 1968 report *Intercommunion Today*⁹ and Resolution 47 of the 1968 Lambeth Conference, this provision was expanded into the regulations contained in B15 A (b) in 1972.
- Thirdly, in 1972 it was agreed to restore the medieval provision that those who were unconfirmed but who were in immediate danger of death should be permitted to receive the sacrament.
- Finally, as a result of a long process of discussion and experimentation starting with the 1971 ‘Ely’ report *Christian Initiation*¹⁰ and following on from the acceptance by General Synod in 1974 of the principle that ‘full sacramental participation within the Church may precede a mature profession of faith,’¹¹ in 1997 the House of Bishops issued regulations permitting baptized children to receive communion before confirmation. These were then superseded by the current regulations in 2006.

3.14 It is important to note, however, that these qualifications do not mean that the Church of England has abandoned the principle that in the case of adults confirmation should normally precede admission to Communion or that it accepts the principle of Baptism as Complete Sacramental Initiation (BACSI) in the sense that baptism conveys everything necessary to live an adult Christian life.¹²

3.15 The first and third qualifications are designed to respond pastorally to situations in which confirmation has not been, or is not, possible. In the case of those ready and desirous for confirmation it is expected that they will be confirmed as soon as possible and if those in danger of death should survive and wish to receive communion they would be expected to be confirmed in the normal way.

3.16 Those belonging to other churches are admitted to communion on the understanding that they have undergone an equivalent process to Church of England confirmation within their own tradition, and if they seem likely to receive communion in the Church of England for an indefinite period ‘the normal requirements of the Church of England for communicant status’ are to be set before them.¹³

3.17 Children are admitted to communion on the understanding that they will be adequately prepared to receive the sacrament and that their parish will encourage them ‘to be confirmed at the appropriate time.’¹⁴

4 What does the Bradford motion propose?

4.1 The Bradford motion proposes that ‘adults’ – presumably, whether baptized as children or as adults – can be admitted to Holy Communion even if they have not been confirmed and either they are not ready for confirmation or they do not desire to be confirmed.

5. What are the concerns about this proposal?

5.1 There are two main concerns about this proposal.

5.2 The first concern is that it will undermine two key elements of the pattern of Christian initiation that the Church of England inherited from the Early and Medieval Church and has subsequently maintained. As the essays in *The Journey of Christian Initiation* argue, in this pattern Christian initiation can be seen as a journey. This journey begins at baptism when someone is sacramentally incorporated into the body of Christ and reaches its goal when he or she is a committed, communicant, adult disciple of Jesus Christ.

⁹ *Intercommunion Today*, London: Church Information Office, 1968.

¹⁰ *Christian Initiation: Birth and Growth in the Christian Society*, GS 30, 1971.

¹¹ *General Synod Report of Proceedings*, Vol 5, No 1, February 1974, p. 287.

¹² For the problems with BACSI see *The Journey of Christian Initiation*, Ch.2.

¹³ Canon B15A (2).

¹⁴ Admission of baptized children to Holy Communion Regulations 2006, 5 (a).

5.3 As has already been indicated in this briefing note, two key elements which have been seen as integral to this journey are (a) a process of Christian formation through which people are inducted into an understanding of the Christian faith and the practice of Christian discipleship and (b) the giving of the sevenfold gift of the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands by a bishop.

5.4 With regard to (a), there is concern that admitting adults to communion without the sort of preparation that ought to precede confirmation will result in a reduction in the importance attached to Christian formation. In the Church of England since the Reformation the focus for Christian formation has been the rite of confirmation and the catechesis that has prepared people for it. By effectively removing the necessity for the intermediate step of confirmation between baptism and communion, the Bradford proposal would remove this focus and thereby tend to undermine the importance that has traditionally been attached to Christian formation.

5.5 With regard to (b) there is concern that the Bradford proposal would lead to confirmation taking place less frequently than is currently the case. If confirmation, or being ‘ready or desirous’ for confirmation, is no longer a normal requirement for those wishing to receive Holy Communion, there will be less incentive for people to be confirmed. This will mean that fewer people are confirmed and that therefore fewer people will receive the gift of the Spirit that God gives through confirmation. It was precisely in order to try to ensure that they did not miss out on this gift that Archbishop Pecham originally introduced the discipline that people had to be confirmed in order to receive communion.

5.6 A subsidiary worry is that if fewer people are confirmed, fewer people will have direct experience of episcopal ministry, and this will further obscure the fact that the diocesan bishop is the principal minister of word and sacrament within his diocese (Canon C18.4) – an important aspect of Anglican ecclesiology of which many in the Church of England are already unaware.

5.7 The second concern is that the Bradford proposal fails to do justice to the need for worthy reception. As noted above, since the Reformation the Church of England’s discipline concerning admission to Holy Communion has been rooted in a belief in the importance of worthy reception of the sacrament. Since the spiritual characteristics required for confirmation and those required for worthy reception of the sacrament are the same, namely a ‘a true penitent heart and lively faith,’¹⁵ the concern is that by removing the requirement that those admitted to communion should either be confirmed, or ready for, and desirous of, confirmation, the Bradford proposal will lead to an increase in the number of people receiving communion when they are not yet spiritually ready to do so.¹⁶

5.8 The goal of the Bradford proposal, namely that more people should receive Holy Communion, is clearly one that the Church of England should support. However, there is concern that in trying to achieve this the proposal will undermine the importance attached to Christian formation, mean that people will fail to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit in confirmation, further obscure the role of the diocesan bishop as the principal minister of word and sacrament in his diocese, and lead people to receive communion in a way that will not benefit them spiritually. These concerns suggest that the Church of England needs to find another way to achieve this goal.

On behalf of the Commission

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¹⁵ Exhortation before communion, *Book of Common Prayer*.

¹⁶ There is an important issue about what it means for people with learning difficulties or dementia being ‘ready or desirous,’ but this issue needs to be addressed by discerning what being ready for, and desirous of, confirmation might mean in their case rather than by abandoning the general requirement for confirmation before communion.