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## CHILDREN AND COMMUNION - NEW REGULATIONS ON THE WAY.

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About eight or nine years ago the General Synod gave its approval to some guidelines in relation to the admission of children to Holy Communion. The practice had been carried out on an 'experimental' basis in various churches and the guidelines were intended to ensure that good practice was being followed. I was at the time a member of General Synod and sought to have one problematic clause removed, but failed. In November the General Synod voted to approve regulations in place of guidelines.

The purpose of the regulations is to allow

*“Children who have been baptised but who have not yet been confirmed and who are not yet ready or desirous to be confirmed as required by paragraph 1(a) of Canon B15A” to “be admitted to Holy Communion provided that the conditions set out in these Regulations are satisfied.”*

On the face of it these new regulations permit rather than require that children be admitted to Communion. Where this happens the regulations provide a mechanism to facilitate this. This requires, for example, that the children concerned do have some preparation, that a parent, or legal guardian approves of the practice and that a register is kept of children who have been admitted under the provisions of the regulations. Before admitting a child to communion the minister would need to ensure that it was baptized. In addition the permission of the Diocesan Bishop must be obtained and therefore it appears to be possible that a Bishop would refuse permission on a blanket basis. (One of my complaints about this change, as with many others, is that it creates more paperwork for Bishops thus reducing the time they can spend on preaching and teaching. In a similar way in our Patronage work we find that Bishops are far more 'hands-on' than ever before in the appointing of clergy.)

Setting aside for a moment the question of whether child communion is right the big problem with these guidelines is in Section 10.

*“A child who presents evidence in the form stipulated in paragraph 9 that he or she has been admitted to Holy Communion under these Regulations **shall be so admitted at any service of Holy Communion conducted according to the rites of the Church of England in any place, regardless of whether or not any permission under paragraph 4 is in force in that place or was in force in that place until revoked.**”*

For a child who has been admitted to communion this regulation obviously makes sense and is fair. But the inevitable effect of this will be that ultimately all parishes will be forced to comply with the practice of child communion whether or not they agree with it.

Therefore, consider what is happening in this regulation. From long before the Reformation the Church of England has not admitted children to the Lord's Table. Therefore what is now happening is a major change to the practice of the Church of England. Some pushing for change seem to be driven by sentimental nonsense but others have clear theological arguments. The problem is that we are now embarking on change without ever giving thought to whether those arguments were legitimate. A few years ago guidelines were introduced but now it is regulations and this will force all of us ultimately to adopt the new practice, without ever asking openly and properly, if this change is desirable.

If we were to have a debate on the theological principles then I suspect that there would be evangelical voices raised on both sides. Indeed a few years ago in Churchman we published articles by Donald Allister against the practice and this was followed by a response from Alan Ward.

There are good reasons for advocating that children be admitted to Holy Communion. There is nothing direct in Scripture, so any arguments are deduced from Scriptural teaching. If we ask what happened in the early Church then there appears to be no evidence either way. Of course this can also be said of infant baptism. In the fourth and fifth centuries there does appear to be evidence that children took part in the Lord's Supper but it is not clear just how young such children were. Later the eastern Churches did admit children but in the west there was a concern to delay so that those admitted did so for the right reasons. I have heard it said that the Roman Catholic Council of Trent (1545-63) anathematized the practice of child communion but this is not strictly true. What they anathematized was those who claimed that it was necessary for children to receive communion in order to be saved (Chapter 3 Canon 6). By children in this understanding are those who have not reached 'the years of discretion'. In the Roman Church this is deemed these days to be around the age of 7 and from this point children can be confirmed and receive communion. The Reformers, whilst overturning much of the practices that had gone before largely retained the Roman view that young children should not be admitted to the Lord's Supper. This is the position adopted in the Book of Common Prayer where the expected process is as follows:

- A child is baptised in infancy and promises are made in their name until they are able to make the promises for themselves. The efficacy of baptism is tied up in genuine faith, therefore where there is no saving faith baptism will be of no effect. (Saving faith of course is the gift of God and therefore what matters in infant baptism is not so much the child's faith as whether it is a child of the covenant – elect from before its birth).
- The child is thus expected to own the faith for itself and when it is deemed old enough to do so the child will be expected to demonstrate an understanding of the faith (using the catechism) and be prepared to own it for themselves, which they do in Confirmation.
- Having owned the faith they are admitted to the Lord's Supper.

Thus the requirement is not so much that someone should understand all the ins and outs of the Lord's Supper, but that there should be real evidence of saving faith, which is owned by the person. Without this the sacrament is empty, indeed as Cranmer reminds us in the 3<sup>rd</sup> exhortation 'so is the danger great ... we eat and drink our own damnation'.

My chief complaint against the present changes is that they are changing our doctrine without admitting that this is what is taking place. Moreover, at the present time there are only around 12% of the churches of the Church of England who are admitting children to communion, yet this doctrinal change is being pushed through on the back of this.

What the Book of Common Prayer doesn't give is any particular age at which children are deemed to be able to make a profession of faith for themselves. My impression has always been that more Anglo-Catholic churches have confirmed at a younger age and evangelicals at an older age. In my own case, in a middle-high church, I was confirmed at the age of 13 or 14 and saw this as my Church passing-out parade (the Lord had different ideas as I discovered a few years later).

It is interesting therefore to note what the Prayer Book says. At the end of the catechism it states: *So soon as Children are come to a competent age and can say, in their mother tongue, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments; and also can answer to the other questions of this short Catechism; they shall be brought to the Bishop...*' The separate Catechism was introduced in the 1662 Book. In Cranmer's original of 1552 the Catechism took place at the start of the Confirmation. In that former service was the expectation that *'when children come to the years of discretion... and may... with their own consent ... ratify and confirm the same...'*

Therefore, it seems that in terms of the BCP the question about when children should be Confirmed is entirely dependent upon the child (and the availability of a Bishop). If the child understands what is being asked of them and is of their own volition prepared to declare their faith they should be confirmed. I can readily accept that for many children this can be at a young age (I remember one friend who claimed to have been clearly converted at the age of 6, but curiously he wasn't baptized until he was about 25). But other children are more inclined simply to imitate their parents at a young age and therefore it is wiser to wait.

One of the sentimentalist arguments used to justify children being admitted to Communion is that they are being deprived. We have already seen that even the Council of Trent rejected such an idea and it is also specifically addressed in the final rubric in the 1552 Confirmation.

What the new regulations will require is that when a parish applies to admit children to communion they should 'make adequate provision for preparation and continuing nurture in the Christian life'. Thus, although no age is specified there appears to be an assumption that it will not be the very young children who are admitted because they must be able to be prepared (unless a Bishop were to decide that no preparation is adequate). What is being lost is the assumption and requirement that children show some evidence of a real and living faith that is not copied but owned by them.