

CHILDREN IN WORSHIP WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO HOLY COMMUNION¹

In the Special Committee on Church Membership we came, at an early stage, to look at the question of admitting children to full participation in Holy Communion. We felt that any attempt to consider the meaning and implications of Church Membership, which was our remit, should begin with Baptism, and with the understanding of Baptism as grafting into the Body of Christ, which is the Church. To be grafted into the Body is surely to become a member of the Body – hence the declaration, ‘This child is now received into the membership of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church’. If we really mean what we say when we say that, then the question inevitably arises – for what reason do we withhold Communion from those we have declared to be members of the Church, or, more strongly, by what right do we deny the Sacrament of the body and blood of Christ to those who are members of His Body?

We found, however, that the question was not as simple as that; and after a while we became, perhaps appropriately, totally immersed in deep theological water. Nevertheless, it may be helpful to consider this matter now, as one way of approaching the question of the place of children in worship. If we can clarify our minds on the position of children in relation to Holy Communion, we may be in a better position to think about their place in worship as a whole.

We may begin with the thesis that the full Communion Service is the norm of worship, and think of the Liturgy of the Word, or the Liturgy of the Catechumens, followed by the Liturgy of the Faithful, or the Liturgy of the Upper Room. Von Allmen describes the Christological basis for this as follows: ‘Above all, it must be pointed out that the very plan of the synoptic Gospels corresponds to the order of worship which doubtless goes back to apostolic times and has become traditional. Once the presence of Christ is assured, a first part – the Galilean ministry – is centred on the preaching of Jesus, on the appeal addressed to men, on the choice with which they are confronted. (This is what will later be described as the mass of the catechumens.) Then follows a second part which explains, justifies and elicits the true content of the first; it deals with the ministry in Jerusalem and is centred on the death of Christ, and the irruption of the eschatological resurrection, taking events up to the point where Jesus leaves his own, blessing them and sending them

forth into the world to bear witness to himself. (This is what will be later described as the mass of the faithful.)²

So von Allmen speaks of the 'Galilean phase' and the 'Jerusalemite phase' of worship. Our Scottish tradition has the children's place in the Galilean phase, but not in the Jerusalemite phase. Are we wrong to confine our children to Galilee, and keep them out of Jerusalem?

The order of the service implies that we approach Jerusalem by way of Galilee. The Word precedes the Sacrament. It has been rightly emphasised that the Sacrament is not to be administered without the prior preaching of the Word. But what are the implications of preaching the Word without subsequent celebration of the Sacrament? We are beginning to see that Communion should be more frequently celebrated, and indeed that it should be celebrated every Sunday. We are moving away from the implication that the Sacrament is the Holy of Holies, only to be approached once a year and then only by those spiritually proud enough to don the High Priest's mantle. But does not this movement towards more frequent Communion, this insistence that we cannot be content to remain in Galilee, this recognition of the necessity of going on to Jerusalem, raise all the more acutely the question of why we leave the children behind in Galilee? Why should they spend 15 years or more there before they can pass the milestone marked 'Years of Discretion', or 'Confirmation', on the way to Jerusalem?

I suspect that this milestone was the millstone round our necks when we found ourselves totally immersed in the deep theological water to which I referred earlier.

Confirmation. What is it? One thing can be said with absolute certainty: we have no consistent tradition or doctrine of Confirmation in the Church of Scotland.

This is not really surprising, because there is no consistent tradition or doctrine of Confirmation anywhere. A potted history of Confirmation might go like this. Baptism was elaborated to include chrismation and laying on of hands as well as baptism with water. The chrismation and laying-on of hands gradually became separated from the baptism with water. This happened because the chrismation and laying-on of hands was a function of the bishop, and so had to await the coming of a bishop to a particular area, which might mean a very long wait. But in view of the belief that an unbaptised child who died would go into limbo, there was a sense of urgency about baptism. So baptism with water in the name of the Trinity took place as soon as possible, but the second part, the other half, had to wait until the bishop came. From these circumstantial and superstitious beginnings, the period between the two ceremonies came to be deliberately extended, until the second part became a

sacrament in its own right, and was called Confirmation. This practice then went in search of a theology. It is still searching; but any proffered doctrine of Confirmation must be a theological attempt to rationalise a culturally conditioned amalgam of superstition and expediency. And anyone who puts *that* in the way of children attending and participating in Communion will be saved only by the fact that it is not even substantial enough to be an effective millstone.

We have to look elsewhere than to Confirmation for the reasons for the exclusion of children from Communion in Scotland. We have to look to the tradition of catechising before Communion – not just before first Communion, but before any Communion. For everyone there was, of course, a first time, a first Communion, and admission was by way of catechising. But there was no special service of admission, even for First Communicants.

Our procedure for instruction and admission of First Communicants is derived from the practice of catechising. There is still no legal obligation to have First Communicants admitted at a Service of Worship, although it has become the widely accepted custom, and in the acceptance of this custom the analogy, if not the theology of Confirmation has played a part. But the legal obligation which does exist is that placed upon the Kirk Session. Before admitting anyone to participation in the Lord's Supper the Kirk Session must be satisfied as to his profession of faith in Christ, his knowledge of the cardinal doctrines of Christian belief, and the nature and significance of Church ordinances; and it must also make proper inquiry to ascertain that, so far as known, his outward life is consistent with his profession.

This is what excludes children. A child might make a sincere profession of faith in Christ, but some would ask whether he really understood what he was saying. And what child would be able to cope with an examination of his knowledge of the cardinal doctrines of Christian belief, and the nature and significance of Church ordinances? Is the law wrong, then?

Clearly there is a strong emphasis on *knowledge*, and from this it is reasonable to infer an emphasis on understanding. What was wrong with much catechising was that there was knowledge without understanding – an ability to recite without any intellectual comprehension of what was recited. This was to comply with the letter of the law rather than with its spirit.

So we ask whether it is an undue emphasis on intellectual knowledge and understanding which excludes children from the Sacrament. Against this, their admission is sometimes urged on the grounds that children learn by participation. This may well be true. But *is* the object of the exercise knowledge and learning? Is this what

worship is about? Is this what is implied by the emphasis on the need to preach the Word before celebrating the Sacrament?

There is a case for saying that the exclusion of children from Communion is based on a failure of adults to understand the true nature of worship.

I am reminded of an incident at lunch at New College. When it was Dr. Lamb's turn to say grace he always said it in Latin. One day, an American woman was sitting next to him, and she remarked, 'Say, Dr. Lamb, when you say grace, I never understand what you're saying.' Dr. Lamb's reply was, 'I'm not addressing you.'

Now, if you take the principle inherent in that reply, and apply it to the whole liturgy, it means that intellectual understanding by man is totally irrelevant.

It is legitimate to ask whether, in reaction against hocus-pocus, which I understand is a corruption of 'hoc est corpus', the Reformation did not over-intellectualise worship, and whether our educationists are not perpetuating that mistake? 'A generation that has passed through the traditional Sunday School tends to find it particularly difficult to understand the true nature of worship. Almost inevitably the assessment of it is likely to be made in instructional terms. Too easily worship may be viewed as essentially a form of adult instruction. Where this happens, emphasis is laid on the sermon, for which hymns, prayers, and the like constitute a kind of preparation.'³

This intellectual bias is not removed when the whole of the first part of the full Communion Service, including the sermon, is seen as a preparation for the second part, the actual celebration of the Sacrament. The instructional character is, in a sense, implied by the very title, 'Liturgy of the Catechumens'. The need for understanding is the ground on which the preaching of the Word is held to be necessary before the celebration of the Sacrament. If, therefore, children who have not made a profession of faith are to be excluded from the 'Liturgy of the faithful', their proper place is in the 'Liturgy of the Catechumens', which is concerned with instruction and preparation. Since, however, the faithful are also present at the 'Liturgy of the Catechumens', the content of this tends to be geared to adults – it is teaching for adults, instruction for adults. So, if the children are present, something geared to children has to be injected – such as a children's sermon. But surely, in fact, much more than teaching and instruction is involved in the first part of the Service. It is perhaps better to use the title 'Liturgy of the Word', because this makes it clear that we are not simply concerned with instruction in the sense of teaching, but with instruction in the sense of commands to be obeyed, and we are concerned with comfort, with challenge, with call to repentance and commitment, indeed

with communion in the sense of God communicating Himself in Christ through the Spirit to those who are called to 'Hear the Word of God'.

Hearing the Word is not an exclusively intellectual exercise, and educational criteria are not the only ones which can appropriately be applied to the Liturgy of the Word. The proper place for educational criteria is the Sunday School, and the Communicants' Class, where instruction is given outwith the context of worship.

But if we are to place a question mark against applying educational criteria to the Liturgy of the Word, we must surely place a larger question mark against applying such criteria to the Liturgy of the Upper Room, as when, for example, we may be tempted to call the symbols 'visual aids', or when we advocate the admission of children to Communion on the educational grounds that children learn by participation. We have not really escaped from the tyranny of the intellect when we substitute educational psychology for theology at this point. Communion is a means of grace, a form of worship, a sacrament – not an educational instrument. If children are capable of worshipping in this way, let them be present in order so to worship. If they are not capable of worshipping in this way, how can they learn by participating?

We shall not solve the problems connected with children in worship unless we recognize worship as an activity in its own right – as man's chief end, rather than as a means to an end, the end being education.

I do not mean to underestimate the importance of education. There is a place for education for worship; there is even a place for education in worship – a place for the teaching sermon, or a place for teaching in preaching. But education enters the sphere of worship in the role of servant rather than in the role of master. It is therefore difficult to see why education, knowledge, understanding, should determine the point at which a person, young or old, should be permitted to move from the Liturgy of the Catechumens to the Liturgy of the Faithful.

There may indeed be a point at which the Church rightly expects knowledge of cardinal doctrines and of the meaning and significance of Church ordinances. It is reasonable to expect such knowledge before a person is allowed to participate in the government of the Church, either by membership of Kirk Sessions or financial courts, or simply by membership of a congregation engaged in a congregational meeting. It is not so clear why such knowledge should be required before admission to Communion.

Again, there may indeed be a point at which the Church rightly expects a personal profession of faith on the part of those who have been baptised in infancy. It is no injury or insult to Baptism to say

that it requires a response. It is God, not man, who acts in Baptism. God's act expects a response from man, but it is not completed by man's response, it does not depend on man's response, it does not require to be confirmed by man's response. But the Church is right to look for, to foster, to encourage, to expect, in due course, the response of a profession of faith from those who have been baptised.

Therefore I have no quarrel with the fact that the Church requires a profession of faith and knowledge of cardinal doctrines and of Church ordinances from its members. What I question is whether the point at which all this is required should be identified with the point of admission to Communion for the first time.

If it be argued that tradition has always made this identification, it must be pointed out that, while such a tradition is indeed strong, it is not universal. There was a stage in the development of Confirmation, for example, when this rite had been deliberately postponed until years of discretion, and when it had been interpreted as 'strengthening for the fight', i.e. entering on the full responsibilities of personally committed membership. But for some time after this stage had been reached, first Communion took place long before such confirmation. It was as the doctrine of transubstantiation developed that it began to appear more and more dangerous to give the bread and wine to a child who might somehow desecrate the actual body and blood of Christ. So it became the practice to give only the wine to children; and later it was considered safer to give only unconsecrated wine to children; and later still it was felt to be safer still to withhold the Sacrament altogether until the time of Confirmation.

Now, if we can argue that the traditional identification of Confirmation with admission to Communion is based, at least to some extent, on the doctrine of transubstantiation as far as its pre-Reformation growth is concerned, and on an over-reaction against superstition and in the direction of intellectual understanding as far as its post-Reformation continuation is concerned, how much weight ought to be given to the fact that tradition has always made the identification?

Another kind of justification for this traditional identification appeared in *The Biblical Doctrine of Baptism*, published in 1958 by our Church's famous Special Commission on Baptism. Noting the fact that the incorporation of children into the Body of Christ by Baptism 'might seem to suggest, as a logical corollary, that children should share in the Lord's Supper', this document goes on to suggest that there is a fundamental difference between the two Sacraments. 'In Baptism we are passive, we are baptised by another. . . . In the Lord's Supper, on the other hand, an active participation on our

part is required: "This *do* in remembrance of Me." This provides a justification for the practice of the greater part of the Church in postponing participation in the Lord's supper until the child is able to "do this" in conscious understanding.' This, however, is a reason which 'will hardly bear looking at', according to Geoffrey Wainwright in his *Christian Initiation*, 1969. He says that it completely ignores the *active* baptismal aorists of Gal. 5:24 or Col. 3:9.

Apart from that linguistic argument, it seems to me that this distinction between passive and active produces a *reductio ad absurdum* if applied to worship as a whole. For if it is true that Baptism is something in which we are passive, and if the implication is that we cannot do anything active until we can do it in conscious understanding, then what part can children possibly play in *any* kind of worship prior to years of discretion? How can we have them present when we say 'Hear the Word of God'? – for surely this expects an active hearing, and the Bible rightly castigates those who are forgetful hearers and not doers of the Word. Or how can we say to children, 'Let us sing hymn so-and-so'? – expecting them actively to stand up and actively to take on their lips words which, in many cases, they can hardly be expected to understand.

I am perfectly prepared to defend the practice of asking children, in the context of worship, to sing hymns they don't understand. At any rate, that is more defensible than asking adults to sing hymns they don't mean – like 'Take my silver and my gold – not a mite would I withhold'. And I think that if we can accept the participation of children in worship, not on sufferance but in virtue of their belonging to the community of the baptised, in virtue of their membership in the Body of Christ, then we have to admit their right to be present at, and to participate in, not only the Liturgy of the Word but also the Liturgy of the Upper Room. It seems to me that pleas about 'conscious understanding', if we admit them at all, would apply more to the Liturgy of the Word than to the Liturgy of the Upper Room. How many of *us* fully *understand* what is happening in the sacred mystery of the Sacrament? How, in any event, are we to assess what could be acceptable as an adequate degree of conscious understanding? If we compare a child who is regularly in Church in the company of his parents, with an adult who comes once or twice a year only to Communion, which do we suppose has the better understanding?

We must, of course, refer to Paul's teaching about the dangers of eating and drinking unworthily, failing to discern the body. I believe that exegesis of that passage must take account of the fact that Paul uses the term 'body' in two senses – of the bread, the loaf, which is the body of Christ; and of the Church, which is the body of Christ. But we can hardly separate these two meanings, for it is

by sharing the one loaf that the Church is, as it were, reconstituted as the one Body of Christ.

So, in this phrase about discerning the body we must allow both senses of the word 'body' to operate; and in the context in which Paul is writing to the Corinthians he is clearly concerned with the unity of the Church at this point. Failure to discern the body is not just failure to understand that the bread represents the broken body of Christ, but also failure to understand that his giving Himself to us in this way unifies the Body which is the Church. To practise disunity at this point is to eat and drink unworthily. Well, it may be asked, can a child understand all this? I suggest that a child who is accepted into the worship of the Church at this point will *feel* accepted, will *feel* that he is really part of the worshipping community, will come to feel at home here in the midst of God's people, and will therefore in a real sense discern the body. If, on the other hand, we think of what we are doing in Communion as the special province of the spiritually mature and so exclude the children who have been admitted to the Body by baptism, are we not making an unwarranted division – are we not failing to discern the Body in that we fail to discern that the Body includes the children?

It seems to me that we are constantly thrown back on our interpretation of Baptism. I think I would be right in saying that originally the Liturgy of the Catechumens was the part of the Service in which the un-baptised could participate, and that Baptism was the qualification for participation in the Liturgy of the Upper Room. That is certainly a position which could be defended from Scripture. From this position, two logical developments are possible: (1) The practice of infant baptism can be maintained, together with the recognition that all the baptised, including children, are entitled to share in the Lord's Supper; and (2) Baptism itself can be postponed until years of discretion, with the consequence that children are excluded from Communion, not because they are children, but because they are not baptised. All sorts of ambiguities creep in when we depart from the logic of these two positions, and try to combine infant baptism with the exclusion of children from Communion. It is from this ambiguity that the unsatisfactory nature of theologies of Confirmation stems. But essentially it is not Confirmation which is an injury or an insult to Baptism – it is the exclusion of the baptised from Communion which is an injury or insult to baptism. Therefore any defence of the practice of infant Baptism is hoist with its own petard if it seeks to safeguard that practice by combining it with the exclusion of children from Communion.

This is the root of our difficulty. We practise infant Baptism, we defend it as being fully in accordance with New Testament doctrine

on Baptism. But at the same time it is written in our Law: Thou shalt not take Communion until thou hast made a profession of faith and attained unto knowledge of the cardinal doctrines of the Church and the meaning and significance of Church ordinances. In so far as these two things are incompatible, it is the Law which prevails over the doctrine of Baptism.

Yet the one decisive answer returned by Presbyteries to the questions sent down by the Assembly from my Committee last year was that there should be a personal profession of faith before admission to Communion. Majority opinion is on the side of the Law.

Why are we, as a Church, so hesitant about following the logic of our doctrine of Baptism? The answer to this question may be found in the fact that Baptism is often so carelessly administered that the Church is in an anomalous situation. We speak nowadays about the Church being in a missionary situation in this country. It has always been said that one of the characteristics of a missionary situation is that the majority of baptisms are adult baptisms. But that is not yet the case in Scotland. Our mission is very largely to people who have been baptised. This is one reason why my Committee promoted a deliverance drawing attention to the provisions of the Act anent the Administration of Baptism to Infants; but I recognize that one does not change attitudes by passing deliverances. We are faced with a deep-seated antinomianism, a dislike of discipline, which is a product, perhaps of nineteenth-century sentimentality about cool Siloam's shady rill and twentieth-century permissiveness which regards liberty of opinion as the only doctrine which is unquestionably of the substance of the faith. So we have a situation in regard to Baptism in which such carelessness prevails at the point of its administration that we feel bound to compensate for our inadequate practice by insisting on a profession of faith later on.

So far as I am aware, no defence of infant baptism is based on the assumption that faith is irrelevant to it. Emphasis is placed on the faith of the Church, the faith of the parents, and indeed in some cases on even the possibility of faith in an infant; or else the emphasis is placed on Baptism as unto faith. Unless we are going to say that, after all, our arguments about faith in infant Baptism are somewhat specious, I do not see why we cannot apply the same arguments to the question of faith in Holy Communion. Is not the context of that the faith of the Church? And if Baptism has been duly administered in the context of the faith of the parents, can the child who is being brought up within the life and worship of the Church not participate with his faithful parents in Communion? May he not have some faith of his own? And cannot Communion be unto faith also, as it is sometimes regarded as a 'converting ordinance'? Indeed, I would

argue that, if the importance of faith in infant Baptism is recognized, Baptism is itself the evidence of faith necessary for admission to Communion. In other words, we injure Baptism if we do not recognize that it confers an *unqualified* right to be admitted to Communion. And we add insult to injury if we administer Baptism in questionable cases and excuse our carelessness by reference to the safeguard of a subsequent profession of faith before admission.

If it were fully admitted and agreed that Baptism does confer the unqualified right of admission to Communion, then the concern of Presbyteries for profession of faith before Communion would be re-directed and would become a concern for the proper exercise of discipline in the administration of Baptism, and the proper exercise of pastoral care after Baptism.

So I come to this conclusion about the place of children in worship: that children, whether baptised or not, have a legitimate place in the Liturgy of the Word; and that baptised persons, whether children or not, have a rightful place in the Liturgy of the Upper Room.

That is my thesis. You can put a question-mark after it if you like. And if it is put in the form of a question, what I am suggesting is that this is the question we must answer, one way or another, before we can hope to come to proper conclusions on the other aspects of children in worship.

NOTES

1. This is the substance, abridged for publication, of an address delivered to the Society at the Conference at Perth on 18th October 1976, by the Convener of the Special Committee anent Church Membership. It is a personal view, however, and not to be taken as representative of the Committee's attitude.
2. *Worship: its Theology and Practice*, Lutterworth, 1965, pp. 22 and 23.
3. Neville Clark in *Worship and the Child*, SPCK, 1975, p. 57.

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