

THE DEATH OF SUNDAY SCHOOLS: CHILDREN AND THE HOLY COMMUNION

For some years now, Elders and members of my congregation, Christ Church United Reformed Church in Morecambe, have become increasingly concerned about the religious education of our children in church. By "children" we mean babes in arms and upwards to teenagers (16+).

In the 25 years that have elapsed since we moved to our present building, the pattern for Sunday morning worship has always been that of the "Dry Communion" for two Sundays out of four when the Holy Communion has not been celebrated. This has been called "Family Worship" which, in practice, meant that children were present in church with their parents for the Approach, Confession and Absolution, Collect for the Day, the Old Testament Lesson, the Prose Psalm for the Day and the Epistle and Gospel. Then, after the notices and before the Intercessions, they left, along with their teachers for their own instruction.

Briefly, there were four areas of concern in this:

1. The children did not experience the full act of Eucharistic worship.
2. They were separated from their parents, i.e. the family unit was being broken by the church in an age where increasingly the family unit is under severe stress.
3. The teachers, rarely, if ever, experienced the full diet of worship including the preaching of the Word, since the majority, as is common practice with Christians, only came to church once a Sunday.
4. We were following the pattern of most mainstream Protestant churches and were not "retaining" many of the children once they reached the age of 16+.

A further related problem was that in Baptismal Services we affirmed that "A.B." was now a member of the church and yet, were seemingly denied the full privileges of what that membership entailed, namely, a share in the celebration of Word and Sacrament. Traditionally, within the Reformed tradition, attendance and participation at the Holy Communion has been confined to communicant members. Children were not admitted because they could not "understand" what they were doing and it was held paramount that communicants should understand.

As a parish minister, I wonder how true that is. Yes, we were taught church doctrine at college, and knew all about “The Real Presence” — though some were forced to think about what an “Unreal Presence” might be. But how many practitioners fully understand what is “happening” during the Eucharistic Celebration? After one of the first Family Communion Services in my church in 1977 at which children were invited to join with the whole family of the church in the family meal, a nine-year-old went home with his older brother and parents for lunch. As they sat at the lunch table, he took a piece of bread and said: “Jesus did this. He took bread, broke it and gave it to his friends saying, ‘this is my body for you’.” This nine-year-old broke the bread and handed it round the table. And that was the first Communion Service he had attended.

Of course there is still within the Reformed tradition a considerable body of opinion which favours the idea that Communion is only for adults. There are those who still remember the first Communion they attended (often in a church where a “quarterly” Communion was the norm) who were left with a lasting impression of the importance of the service for all who shared in it, and who had no sense of deprivation, knowing that they were to wait until they were “ready” at a later age. The Church of England received a Report on Christian Initiation in 1971 which urged that people should be admitted to a share in Communion without first being “confirmed”,¹ but that adequate preparation should be provided to enable the person to share fully in the Eucharist and that the first Communion should be administered by the diocesan Bishop, wherever possible. It suggests that Confirmation should be kept as a later occasion requiring full commitment to the life of the church, since young people are often not ready to do that and are inclined to rebel against such a requirement while the anguish of adolescence is still progressing. That may well be true at 10-13 years of age, but does it necessarily follow that they are more likely to make the act of fuller commitment if they wait until they are in the age range 15-18? Another argument used in support of “communion for adults only” is to be found in St Paul’s account of the Institution in 1 Cor. 11: 23-29, where the Apostle charges men to examine themselves in order to ensure that they do not partake unworthily. The assumption is that while adults are “worthy”, children are not. Paul’s admonition was specially necessary in the church at Corinth, but does it not apply equally to us all, older and younger, in the church today?

This discussion began with the problem of Christian Education of our children and I have allowed it to spill out into

a discussion of "Children and Holy Communion" — why? Could use not have been made of "The Children's Services" as in the *Book of Common Order* (1940)? The answer to that is simple, though some may disagree. The norm for the Sunday worship of God's people is the Eucharist. Children are part of the family of God's people.

What happens in practice? Up to the dissolution of our Sunday School (which in itself was not an easy task — most of the objectors being folk who never visited the Sunday School classes nor knew what was going on in them!) — the practice of my church had been that the Eucharist was celebrated once a Sunday at one of the following times: 9.15 a.m., 10.45 a.m. or 6.45 p.m. From the dissolution, we initiated a Family Service at 9.30 a.m., followed by the main service at 10.45 a.m. and Evening Prayer at 6.45 p.m. The Family Service is always Eucharistic, though, on occasion we have celebrated the Sacrament of Holy Baptism — incidentally, 9.30 a.m. seems to be an ideal time for young babies, so their mothers tell me. Once a month, apart from the Festivals, the Eucharist is celebrated at 10.45 a.m. and at 6.45 p.m. Approximately once a month a Family Service is held at 10.45 a.m., normally on or close to one of the Festivals of the Church, The Presentation, a major Saint's Day, etc. The Order of Worship at the 9.30 a.m. Family Service corresponds to the Order for the Communion in *The Book of Common Order* (1979), for which printed Congregational Orders are available. We began on the 9th Sunday before Christmas with the "countdown" to the Incarnation.

During the singing of the first hymn (after the Opening Responses and the saying of the Collect for Purity together) a young person carries in the Bible and places it on the lectern, open at the Scripture Lesson. At the 9.30 a.m. services only one Lesson is read. This is a distinct disadvantage which is somewhat offset by the reading of the three, at the 10.45 a.m. Family Service once a month. The Lesson is the "Controlling Lection" of the Joint Liturgical Group. It is upon this lesson that the address is based. The Offertory Procession is conducted by the young people who bring up the gifts of money, the flagon of wine and the paten holding the loaf.

The "Seasonal Thanksgiving" is often based on the lection and address. A large "nave altar" stands at the top of the chancel steps (large enough for a family to stand round it when necessary and for them to act as Elders on occasion) and all come forward to the chancel steps and kneel to receive the elements from the hands of the ministers and using the chalice.

(At 10.45 a.m. services, Elders also assist as is customary and still distribute the elements using the individual glasses. However, since the introduction of the Family Services increasingly, more and more people come forward to receive Communion. I have not asked whether it is the actual “coming forward” or the use of the chalice which has led the vast majority of the congregation to come forward. When we discover the reasons, then we shall have some further serious thinking to do.) The majority of children receive the elements, though there are a few who, because of their parents’ wishes, or maybe their own, or because they were very young, do not receive, but are given a blessing at the hands of the ministers.

Recently a young couple, new to our church, started attending, and came forward with their eight-year-old, kneeling between mummy and daddy. After mummy had received, I handed the chalice to the little girl, who drank, and then, without waiting to hand it back to me, passed it on to daddy and said: “For you daddy”. Reason is blown to the four winds when “happenings” like that take place. I was delighted.

The important factor in this is that worship is not “the serious affair that the adults get down to after the children leave for their own instruction”, it is something that children learn to do along with mummy and daddy, from whom they learn much more than ever I, or the noble army of martyrs, will ever be able to teach them.

Approximately every six weeks or so a “Competition” form (much better word than “test”) is handed out and we can therefore check the learning process that has gone on. The hymns are led by the Junior Choir, who are robed, and more often than not, accompanied on the piano. Their Choir Rehearsal is held immediately after the service. Two candles stand on the table and these are extinguished by a young person during the closing hymn.

Surrounding the worship is colour, movement and drama. Following the Church’s Year, the ongoing drama of creation and redemption is unfolded before their eyes. The colours change on the pulpit falls, the Bible markers, and the ministers’ stoles. In Advent even the flowers are the sombre purple. There is opportunity to explain why the colours change and what the symbols on the falls represent. All in all it adds up to a religion involving almost all the senses, not just the intellect, which is in accord with current educational practice (Piaget, Goldman et. al.).

The negative factors?

1. Those who only attend the 10.45 a.m. service only see the majority of younger folk and parents once a month.
2. We have created a further separate congregation.

The positive factors?

1. The ministers are fully aware of what the children are being taught.
2. The ministers are involved in a real and lasting relationship with the children.
3. The children are being trained to worship.
4. Whole families are attending.
5. The children feel that they have a contribution to make in worship.
6. We can do things with children in worship which spills into the adult worship and which, if we attempted at "normal" worship would cause definite and distinct problems. (How many Protestants have, for example, smelled incense in their worship as we did on 6th January?)
7. The music has improved with a supplement to our hymn book being produced which is also used at the later services.
8. The "after-church fellowship" has improved. Coffee is served immediately after the Family Service and the young parents stay to talk with each other and with older members of the church and Elders, some of whom "drop in" before the second service.
9. A goodly number of parents are those whom we felt we had lost or were losing.
10. The comments from the parents are along the lines of "we like the informality" — and that about a carefully structured and fully "congregational" act of worship!

Is this experimental? As far as the Elders and members of the church are concerned, the answer is "yes", but my feeling is that the only objective means of assessing whether it is "working" is to wait until our present three, four and five-year-olds are in their late teens and reaching or have passed the "drop out" stage. In essence we are talking about it being experimental for fifteen or so years.

The service includes four hymns, a lesson, the address, prayers of confession, absolution, intercession and the full Great

Prayer of Thanksgiving and is over in approximately thirty-five or forty minutes with the Communion of the People. Yes, there is a great deal of repetition but those who have children know how much they appreciate familiar stories and familiar words. 9.30 a.m. on a Sunday morning may be early, but most children are up and about by then, anyway. It is the adults who have a "long lie". There is no reason why we may not alter the times of the services to 10.00 a.m. and 11.00 a.m.

It is interesting to reflect that our sisters and brothers of the Roman Catholic Church have had no problems whatever about Sunday School or Family Services. Indeed when I was last in London I worshipped at Brompton Oratory where there was a congregation in excess of five hundred souls, including children of all ages. For a minister of the Reformed tradition, what struck me most was the fact that although it was only two years ago, the most part of the Mass was in Latin, including magnificent Latin motets. There was also an erudite and long sermon. Whether it is right or wrong remains to be seen, but there was certainly no provision made for the children present.

One last comment from a 3½-year-old. He was sitting on the floor playing with a lorry as the service progressed. The Junior Choir, including his sister, were singing the carol "Joseph and the Angel". Mummy was trying to distract him from his lorry and said: "Listen to what Sara is singing". He continued playing with his lorry and muttered: "Me knows the story".

Mummy said: "What do you mean? Tell me the story."

Nicholas, still playing with lorry replied: "It's about a mummy and daddy, Mary and Joe . . . seph. They had a baby and a donkey."

Literally, "out of the mouth of babes"!

If Christian worship (and Communion) is primarily the offer of God's love to his people and the expression of the congregation's yearning after that love, then both adults and children ought to be full participants in that worship — and Communion — as they grow together in Christ.

NOTE

1. In "Confirmation" it is the confirmand who does the "confirming": i.e. he "confirms" the promises made on his behalf by his parents (and god-parents or sponsors) at his Baptism.

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