

**Baptism as the Gateway  
to Holy Communion  
*with History of Confirmation:***

**A Reworking of  
Baptism and Communion  
in Anglicanism**

**by The Most Reverend Drexel W. Gomez  
WITH ADDITIONAL SOURCES**

# 1. What is Baptism?

Baptism is the Sacrament by which God unites us Christ, adopts us as His children and makes us members of Christ's Body, the church, and inheritors of the kingdom of God.

The ancient form of initiation involved one rite with three elements: the water bath, the hand laying, and the anointing (Chrismation), and first communion included infants and children.

The Eastern Orthodox Churches have retained this single rite of initiation, with no separate service of Confirmation. In the Western Church, the Rite of Baptism initially followed the pattern outlined above.



## 2. Baptism and Holy Eucharist in the Early Church

In the Didache (1<sup>st</sup> – 4<sup>th</sup> century AD): “But let no one eat or drink of your Thanksgiving (Eucharist), but they who have been baptised into the name of the Lord; for concerning this also the Lord has said, Give not that which is holy to the dogs. Matthew 7:6”  
Chapter 9

Justin Martyr wrote in *The First Apology* (AD 155-157): “And this food is called among us **Εὐχαριστία** [the Eucharist], of which no one is allowed to partake, but the man who believes that the things which 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 has enjoined.”

The Didache, also known as The Lord's Teaching Through the Twelve Apostles to the Nations, is a brief anonymous early Christian work written in Koine Greek, dated by most modern scholars to the first century.

## 3. Baptism and Holy Communion to Infants

Infant communion was not a twentieth-century innovation, but rather an ancient practice.

The Eastern Church has maintained Baptism is the complete right of Christian Initiation, inclusive of the Baptism and communion for infants.

In the Western Church, circumstantial evidence suggests that infants received communion at their baptisms in the second century and by the third century in northern Africa.

A fourth-century inscription in Sicily recorded that an eighteen-month-old received the Eucharist, and the Fourth Century Apostolic Constitution referred to babes in arms taking the Bread and Wine as well.

A seventh-century liturgical text, the *ORDOROMANUS XI*, and a twelfth-century Roman pontifical both gave instructions presuming that nursing infants would receive communion. The Gregorian Sacramentary required explicitly that infants be communicated immediately after their baptisms, and Elfric of York ordered his clergy to give newly baptised infants the Eucharist.

That the early church administered communion to infants was recognized in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries debates in England between those who practiced infant baptism and those who insisted on believer's Baptism. Jeremy Taylor even argued that infants should be given both sacraments or none, and infant communion was practiced in the eighteenth century by Non-jurors, as part of their recovery of ancient liturgical practices.

#### **4. Withdrawal of Holy Eucharist from infants**

The withdrawal of communion from infants happened in stages in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and it had nothing to do with knowledge or Confirmation.

1. The difficulty experienced by some infants in swallowing the consecrated Bread led to the practice of giving infants only the cup.
2. When the practice of giving the laity the consecrated wine gradually ceased over the course of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, it had the incidental effect of eliminating the one kind in which infants received.
3. Only later in the thirteenth century did pious traditions arise about the need to have reached the age of discretion before communion, but this was not the cause of the end of infant communion.
4. The teaching of Thomas Aquinas influenced the Councils of Florence and Trent. He wrote of *aetas perfecta* 'perfect age' when the person acquired a certain dignity.

#### **5. Development of the Rite of Confirmation**

As the church developed, the rite of Confirmation was not distinct from Baptism until the fourth century. In the *Didache* (first century) and the *Shepherd of Hermas*

(second century), only Baptism is mentioned as an initiation rite. However, in the fourth century, the words 'sphragis' and 'signaculum' were used to indicate seal, as used in Confirmation, which was distinct from Baptism at that time.<sup>1</sup>

In the middle ages, the hand-laying and anointing became a separate rite of Confirmation. The expansion of the church necessitated the utilization of Presbyters to officiate at the role of Baptism, but the bishops retained the right to preside at the hand-laying and anointing. The distance between Baptism and Confirmation was bridged by provision of first communion for those baptised as infants.

## **6. Additional Reasons for the development of Confirmation?**

The Council of Elvira (Spain), about 300, referred to emergency baptism of ailing ship-bound catechumen by a faithful one. If the person recovered, they were to 'be made perfect by the imposition of hands' by the Bishop<sup>2</sup>.

The Synod of Arles (314) convened by Constantine to address the issue of rebaptism of heretics, concluded that the individual, questioned about the creed, and being previously baptised using the trinitarian formula should then only have hands laid on them to receive the Holy Spirit.

The Council of Orange (441) made specific reference to Confirmation. In the fifth century in Gaul, the confirmation rite involved the imposition of hands. There could also be anointing with oil, but only if the priest baptised in the absence of the Bishop and the candidate not receiving chrismation.

The Second Council of Lyons was the second general council to mention Confirmation. The Bishop conferred Confirmation by the imposition of hands and anointing of those who were reborn. Confirmation occurred immediately after Baptism and before Eucharist.

The bull *Exultate Deo*, a part of the decrees of the Council of Florence (1438-1445), indicated that the Sacrament was given for strength. The Council of Trent (1545) indicated that, like Baptism and holy orders, Confirmation imprinted a 'character of soul.'<sup>3</sup>

---

1 Bohen, M. 1966. *The Mystery of Confirmation: A theology of the sacrament*. New York: Darton Long & Todd

2 p. 28. Bohen, M. 1966. *The Mystery of Confirmation: A Theology of the Sacrament*. New York: Darton Long & Todd

However, The Roman Catholic Church never mandated Confirmation as the gateway to the reception of Holy Communion.

## 7. Confirmation as the Gateway to Communion in the Anglican Church

When John Peckham became archbishop of Canterbury in the thirteenth century, he wanted to bring the English Church more in line with Rome. To exercise greater control over the congregations, he insisted that no one should receive the Sacrament unless he or she had been confirmed by a bishop. This was a clever means to give bishops more power in the congregations. The Bishop had to visit the congregation to confirm so that the people could receive the Sacrament, but as Charles P. Price points out in an issue of Occasional Papers, published by the Standing Liturgical Commission, the good Bishop's intent was to encourage Confirmation by his bishops and not to exclude persons from the communion.<sup>4</sup>

## 8. Why return to Baptism as the gateway to Holy Communion?

In both the Eastern and the Western Tradition, Baptism was seen as full and complete initiation.

Twentieth Century liturgical scholarship has drawn attention to the original unified rite of initiation in the early church, which included various ceremonies, such as anointing and hand laying in addition to the water bath in Baptism. The movement has promoted a baptismal ecclesiology, with an emphasis on Baptism as the entry into discipleship, and an assertion that Baptism is full initiation. In the 1979 Prayer Book of the Episcopal Church, which is a child of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century liturgical movement, on page 289, the Prayer Book states, "Holy Baptism is full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ's Body the Church. The Book adds, "The bond which God establishes in baptism is indissoluble." One becomes a full member of the church in Baptism and cannot lose that status by any means".

The adherents of the modern liturgical movement maintain that it is the right of every baptised-regardless of age-to participate in the Eucharist.

The Eucharist is an action of the whole church of which the baptised infants are a part.

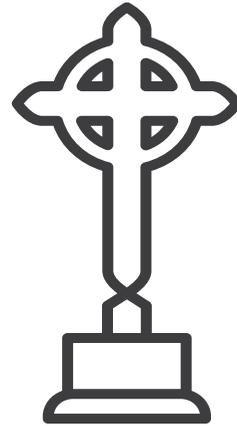
If one accepts that baptism inaugurates a relationship with God in Christ, that is nurtured in the Eucharist, to deny a baptised child the Eucharist is to deny him/her the sacramental nourishment needed to sustain life in Christ.

---

3 p. 30, Bohen, M. 1966. *The Mystery of Confirmation: A Theology of the Sacrament*. New York: Darton Long & Todd

4 Joseph P. Russell and Jane L. Weaver, *Children in the Eucharist* (Education for Mission and Ministry, Episcopal Church Center, 1990), 7.

A careful examination of the baptismal rite of the CPWI Prayer Book, reveals that there is an inherent conflict between the theology contained in the rite and the continued practice of insisting on Confirmation as a gateway to communion.



The theology and ecclesiology found in the Declaration and Collect on page 272, the presentation of the candidates (page 274), the Baptismal Covenant (page 275-276), the signing of the cross (page 279) is entirely consistent with the theology and ecclesiology found in the 1979 Prayer Book of the Episcopal Church affirming that Baptism makes us full members of the Body of Christ.

Although we are living members of the church, which is the body of Christ, we are unable to be fed with the Body and Blood of Christ until we have undergone a cognitive test that would facilitate understanding and leading to Confirmation.

The common practice in the nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries had been to withhold communion until Confirmation, but, influenced by Parish Communion Movement and the modern liturgical movement, clergy in many Provinces of the Communion began to administer communion to unconfirmed children. The Episcopal Church authorized communion to baptised children in 1970.

The adherents of the modern liturgical movement maintain that it is the right of every baptised—regardless of age—to participate in the Eucharist.

The Eucharist is an action of the whole church of which the baptised infants are a part.

If one accepts that Baptism inaugurates a relationship with God in Christ, that is nurtured in the Eucharist, to deny a baptised child the Eucharist is to deny him/her the sacramental nourishment needed to sustain life in Christ.

To withhold the Eucharist from the baptised negatively impacts their Christian development. The church at large is being challenged to adopt the right of the baptised—regardless of age, to participate in the Eucharist.

## **9. Why children should participate in the Holy Eucharist?**

As children participate in the Eucharist, they are formed as Christians. Sharing in the Eucharist (liturgy) and receiving communion allows experiential learning. This kind of

learning is especially suited to children. It is the primary basis of how the very young explore their world, begin to make associations, and learn. Through the rest of early childhood, experience is an important means of learning. Indeed, theorists and practitioners of early childhood education have come to emphasize the important role of experiential learning, including taking part in adult activities. Attending the liturgy with a parent or guardian, participating in the ways that they can (singing, moving following along in the Prayer Book or hymnal, making responses), and receiving communion all help a child learn about the Christian life. The emphasis is on formation over information, on walking the walk of the Christian life.

## **10. What about eating the communion without understanding?**

The promoters of the Eucharist for all the baptised, maintain that the objections to the communion of baptised children—that they were not yet confirmed, and that they needed instruction leading to understanding—simply do not withstand scrutiny.

Baptism is now seen as full and complete initiation; Confirmation is no longer a prerequisite for reception of the Eucharist.

The assertion that children must “understand” the Eucharist before receiving had its origins not in the early Christian practice, but in the catechetical program of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century reformers. It substitutes an educational agenda for a sacramental one, and it wrongly implies that “rational understanding must precede the reception of God’s grace.” (Louis Weil).

It also begs the question of whether most adult communicants understand communion in terms that are much more advanced than the average child and whether understanding is likely to be accurate.

In this regard, Lee Mitchell argues that an understanding of nutrition is not required before a small child is allowed to eat at the family dinner table. By extension, one ought not to insist on a theological understanding of the Sacrament before communion.

## **11. What could be the future of Confirmation?**

The Episcopal Church included a reduced rite of confirmations in its 1979 Prayer Book.

1. There is scope for a mature affirmation of faith and mature recommitment to the vows in Baptism. Confirmation from this perspective, affirms a relationship between the candidate, who is renewing baptismal promises, and the Lord into whom he/she was baptised.
2. The Bishop’s function at this mature recommitment service is to provide a symbolic representation of the larger church, witnessing this renewal, and offering the blessing of

God and the sacred anointing. In this renewal ceremony, God is asked to strengthen or defend the individual, not to provide something previously lacking.

3. It should always take place in a Eucharistic celebration. Throughout the Christian pilgrimage, there is a need for a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

4. If Confirmation is to be celebrated as a mature affirmation of personal faith, the church must revisit the age of those participating in the recommitment. This renewal and recommitment of baptismal vows focuses on the life-changing baptismal promise of Christian discipleship. To make a truly mature public affirmation of these vows is a very demanding thing. Persons in their early teen years have not arrived at a level of Christian formation. They should not be encouraged to offer themselves prematurely. In the early eighties, Urban "Terry" Holmes opined that a more appropriate range was eighteen to twenty-five years. Supporters of this position also acknowledge that this does not deny that some persons arrive at maturation at different ages.

5. The supporters of the retention of Confirmation maintain that persons making a mature affirmation of the Baptismal vows need to understand both the importance of their renewal of the baptismal promises and its subordination to Baptism itself. Thus, renewal is not the completion of Baptism but a public affirmation of the church's baptismal faith and a commitment to continue to grow as a member of the community of the baptised.

Our greatest challenge will be to commend the rite of Confirmation as a renewal of baptismal vows given at the Baptism of Infants or adults, accompanied by laying on of hands with anointing by the Bishop, in the context of Holy Eucharist. Confirmation will no longer provide its present access to Holy Communion. In its new setting, Confirmation serves a useful pastoral function at a point in time when it is pastorally appropriate and beneficial for an individual, baptised as an infant, to ritualize a deepening or renewed commitment to living the life of a baptised person. Such public adult affirmation of one's Baptism must always be an act of free will, undertaken by mature autonomous adults. Candidates for Confirmation will also need to understand both the importance of their public reaffirmation of their baptismal promises and their renewed commitment to live the Christian life.

Additionally, they must recognize and acknowledge that Confirmation is not the completion of Baptism but an owning of the Baptismal covenant. In this regard, Confirmation can provide an important opportunity for an individual baptised as an infant, to ritualize a definite turn in their spiritual journey involving a mature commitment to vows made by others on their behalf. Such public commitments can be significant in the life of an individual, and the liturgies and the persons who take part demand the care and attention of the clergy.

## **12. Will communion be available to baptised persons of other denominations?**

All persons who are baptised in water and in the name of the Holy Trinity are permitted to receive Holy Communion at the Celebration of the Holy Eucharist within our dioceses and jurisdictions. None is required so to receive, but no barrier should be erected to prevent all the baptised from making their Communion.

### **REFERENCES**

1. Bohlen, M. 1966. *The Mystery of Confirmation: A theology of the Sacrament*. New York: Darton Long & Todd
2. p. 28. Bohlen, M. 1966. *The Mystery of Confirmation: A Theology of the Sacrament*. New York: Darton Long & Todd
3. p. 30, Bohlen, M. 1966. *The Mystery of Confirmation: A Theology of the Sacrament*. New York: Darton Long & Todd
4. Joseph P. Russell and Jane L. Weaver, *Children in the Eucharist (Education for Mission and Ministry, Episcopal Church Center, 1990)*, 7.
5. World Council of Churches. Commission on Faith and Order., "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry," *International Review of Mission* 72, no. 286 (April 1983): 157–98, paragraph 13.

