

# THE CHRISTIAN FAMILIES' PARTICIPATION IN BAPTISM AS A BASIS FOR INCLUDING CHILDREN IN HOLY COMMUNION

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## *Abstract*

Children have become a central point of the Holy Communion in the church. As a result, issues such as understanding baptism, understanding children, the demands from parents and demands from children and the developments of children's participation in the church will be discussed. Throughout the history of Christianity the issue of baptism has been seen as the only way to accepting children into the fellowship of the faithful. Families have been the ones guiding the children's Christian faith as they grow to become responsible adults with faith. Their (the children's) exclusion has prompted them to raise questions with parents about their role in the Christian community particularly in the Holy Communion. As a result, Christian families form the central part of children's participation in the Holy Communion. The article will proceed to discuss the dynamics which are involved. This will be followed by the conclusion that will be drawn from the article itself.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The issue of children's participation in the Holy Communion has for many years been problematic. However, in recent years it has become an item on the agenda for many Christian denominations throughout the world. Different churches have brought this issue to their conferences, synods and councils. The aim was to try and find

answers to how best children can be allowed to participate meaningfully in the church, and taking into account their role which will go along with their developmental stage as they grow in faith. In South Africa denominations such as the Methodist Church and the Anglican Church have produced reports which focused primarily on children and the Holy Communion. Catholics also addressed the issue of children's participation in the Holy Communion way back in the 1960s and this has prompted other Christian denominations (churches) to take up the challenge and address the matter of baptism, confirmation and Holy Communion involving the children. However, the article will not pay attention to these two denominations (The Methodist Church and the Anglican Church). Attention will be on the way the church dealt with issues affecting children (in particular the Holy Communion) and the role of parents and families towards the participation of children in the Holy Communion. There will also be an insight on how children think about their exclusion in the Holy Communion and the feeling of adults about the presence of children in the Sacrament as they (adults) receive the elements of the Holy Communion.

## 2 THE ORIGIN OF BAPTISM FROM THE EARLY CHURCH

The history of the sacrament (Holy Communion) in the Christian church dates back to the early church. In many of the Christian denominations the tradition was kept almost the way it originated. However, the modern church has adopted some new forms in which the participation of the children was taken seriously, and this was particularly in relation to thanksgiving which in the past excluded the children. Other sacraments such as baptism were the points of doctrinal debates by the ecumenical councils in the early centuries of the church. These councils carefully looked at the doctrines such as baptism and its meaning, confirmation, Holy Communion, the trinity and catechism. In many instances these were seen as part of the initiation of both the new converts and the children into the Christian community.

According to Hallesby (1964:15) infant baptism is a human ordinance which came into existence long after the death of the disciples and, at that time, it came as a result of the church's expansion into other regions or parts of the world. It was probably for reason that infant baptism was enjoined during the union between the church and state dating back to 325 AD. The history of an infant and child baptism was not a simple thing to interrogate. Children's baptism was presupposed and spoken by the Church Fathers, especially after the death of John the Apostle. At that time of the Church fathers', 250 AD, there were two types of baptismal practices running parallel, and these were the child and adult baptism (Hallesby 1964:16). However, this has proven to be a difficult historical problem. In his argument, Hallesby (1964:16) says that these were opposite methods of the procedure of baptism and that they could not have originated with the apostles. Possibilities were that one of these two methods of baptism could have departed from the Apostolic tradition. Hallesby (1964:18) points out the following as a way in which the apostles defended the infant and child baptism:

First: Those Church Fathers who defend the Baptism of children emphasize explicitly that infant Baptism was practiced by the apostles. And the Fathers who reject Infant Baptism never deny this assertion. They do not attack on historical grounds, but for intellectual reasons. 'Why does the innocent age hasten to the washing of Baptism' says Tertullian.

Secondly: When the administration of Baptism to children was attacked, it was because of the view of Baptism which early had crept into the church, namely, that it was impossible for one who had been baptized and then fallen away from God to be converted again. As a result of this view, it was very common to postpone Baptism as long as possible, even to the death-bed, in order to guard oneself in the best possible way against falling away after being baptized. But that makes it clear why they did not want to baptise little children. Thus clear light is thrown upon the struggle against Infant Baptism in earliest times.

The early Church fathers like Tertullian, Cyprian, Cyril, Ambrose and Augustine did not say much about infant baptism, especially as this is referenced in Matthew 19:13-14 to warrant infant baptism (Pocknee 1996:13). At that time there was no rite for infant baptism. This text of Matthew can further be cross-examined against Mark 10:13-16 and Luke 18:15-16. At the same time Tertullian seems to be opposed to infant baptism even though it was not clear that it was appropriate to delay it according to the state and character of a person (Pocknee 1996:13). Instead, for Tertullian this seemed to imply that 'let the children come' to mean only if they are learning and nothing more. 'Learning', here may mean only when children were able to know Christ. For Tertullian, the ability of the candidate depended on how baptism was understood.

### 3 UNDERSTANDING BAPTISM

The earliest form of baptism dates back from the Apostolic tradition (carried by the Church fathers) during the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century. It was in most cases preceded by catechumenism in which a candidate was not allowed to participate in prayer with the faithful, eat with them or even share a kiss of peace (Mitchell 1991:3). This exclusion of the candidates meant that they were to study the catechism for a period of three years, and those (candidates) at their final stage of catechuminae would be separated and be allowed to hear the reading of the Gospel. At that moment candidates were prepared for baptism which included an act of exorcism and the laying on of hands was followed by baptism at cockcrow (present time approximately 2h00 or 3h00 am). Candidates for baptism would prepare themselves by fasting on a Good Friday and their final exorcism was on a Saturday performed by the bishop. This exercise was followed by the vigil in which these candidates spent a night 'listening to reading and instruction' (Mitchell 1991:4). At cockcrow the bishop would bless the water and oil and candidates would remove their clothes for baptism. This was followed by each candidate renouncing the devil and all his servants and his works, and this would be followed by the anointing with oil of exorcism by the presbyter. Baptism in this particular case meant that the candidates were led into the water by the deacon and asked to affirm their faith in the following manner: 'Do you believe in

God, the Father Almighty?’ The response from the individual candidates would be ‘I believe,’ immediately they were immersed in the water. This old form of baptism (which was believed to be from the Apostolic tradition) and the liturgy was revised in 1963, and it gave birth to new liturgies not only in the Catholic Church but throughout the Christian community.

The revised baptismal liturgy meant that the baptism of the initiates was something that was seriously considered. In some situations the Order for Holy Baptism states that the infant baptism automatically means confirmation even several years after (Mitchell 1991:9). Mitchell (1991:10) further elaborates by stating that two rites of baptism formed part of one process of entry into the Christian church. The process of initiating the children continued to maintain the two stages (namely baptism and confirmation). The baptism of infants has in the past been following two procedures which were to maintain the unity of the rite and to admit infants to communion. Massey Shepherd (quoted in Mitchell 1991:10) advocated this rite of infant baptism in the Episcopal Church in 1964, while the Catholic Church has not admitted infants and young children to confirmation and communion. It must be remembered that the Catholic Church was not alone in this practice because other denominations particularly from the Protestant churches followed a similar pattern. In these denominations admission to the Eucharist or the Holy Communion was only qualified through confirmation; young children were only admitted to the Holy Communion when they had gone through ‘catechetical age’ or ‘years of discretion’. Mitchell’s (1991:11) argument was that celebration of children should form part of the church’s regular worship service (Sunday liturgy). In 1980 the Catholic Church issued an Instruction on Infant Baptism which opposed the views of people who thought that it was appropriate to delay the baptism of children until the completion of catechism (Report of the Church of England 1995:77). This meant that children could be baptised and only become catechumens for a certain duration. Alternatively children could do so until an individual was able to make a personal commitment or even until the beginning of adult life.

## 4 DISAGREEMENT ON INFANT BAPTISM

Disagreement on infant baptism is an old thing in Christian circles. Some people believe that it is impossible for children and infants to be candidates for baptism or that candidates must be people in a position to profess their faith. Pocknee (1991:14) seems to think that early Church fathers in North Africa did not generally practise infant baptism. At that time there seemed to have been enough evidence to suggest that there was an increasing demand for infants to be baptised.

For the Church of England, this was against their historical tradition since they asserted that children and infants were proper candidates for baptism and this was in line with both the scriptural tenor and the historical tradition of the church (Church of England General Synod 1995:77). In other circles, people argued that infant or child baptism did not appeal to the rule of catechumenal initiation for its justification. Of importance to the catechumenal approach was the rule that people be welcomed and be embraced in the church (Church of England General Synod 1995:77). The main point of contention is that infants and children are free of responsibilities, which in this case, was seen as equivalent to a person suffering from a severe mental disability. The simple rule was to accept individuals for baptism and accept the responsibility of nurturing their faith. Perry (1967:80) brought a counterargument about the mental instability, citing that children tend to find the sacrament far clearer and more direct than the spoken word. On the other hand it seems that children between the ages of eight and ten understand the Eucharist better than the youth at the age of sixteen. Another problem was that, in a particular situation, baptised children and infants were deprived of the dramatic personal and corporate experience of baptism. This problem resembles the one where children and infants were thought to be unlikely candidates for baptism. The argument stretches a little further when Perry (1967:81) points out that, irrespective of all the teachings about full membership of the family of Christ, to many lay people, confirmation is seen as a passport to the Holy Communion and this was the same with both the children and the youth. Hallesby's (1964:18) argument is simply that the scripture does not say anything about infant baptism. In this particular case men

rejected infant baptism citing lack of scriptural justification. The same men did not reject women's participation in the Lord's Supper since this, too, is also not enjoined anywhere in the scripture. Neither does the scripture relate that women should participate in the *sacrament of the altar*. What this mean, is that, if the opponents of infant baptism reject it on the grounds of scripture, then they must be sincere and forbid women to come to the *table of the Lord*.

## 5 CHILDREN'S MOVEMENTS (SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT)

What all these disagreements have in common is that it was important to revisit the history of baptismal theology especially in the liturgical practice of the church. At the same time there were prospects that the catechumenism may be applied to initiate the children. In some denominations this process took off with parents encouraging their children to participate in Sunday school education, children's cells (classes), milk teeth *manyano*, confirmation classes (the latter two are mainly in the Methodist Church), altar boys (mainly in the Catholic and the Anglican Churches). Children were welcomed as catechumens to participate in small groups because larger groups tend to be uncomfortable (Church of England General Synod 1995:78).

On the other hand, parents were also encouraged to participate in the activities which prepared their children for both baptism and confirmation. Participation of parents in the baptism of children was done through the exploration of involving the parents in the rite of baptism (Church of England General Synod 1995:79). This allowed pastoral contact especially during pregnancy so that parents could be blessed from its (pregnancy's) beginning. At the same time parents and godparents were to meet with the catechist during pregnancy and after birth up to the time of baptism. What this meant was simply that an emphasis would be placed on balanced Christian formation as well as on the potential for prayer and worship at home.

## 6 THE UNDERSTANDING OF CHILDREN AND COMMUNION (METHODIST PERSPECTIVE)

Like most churches, the Methodist Church also practises infant baptism. However, in the past, children were not welcomed to participate in the Holy Communion. To some people this gave the impression that children were viewed as not forming the church of today. As a result, confirmation which was to take place later in their lives (as adults) pre-supposed that they were the church of tomorrow. To the Methodist Church, baptism, and not confirmation was understood to be a theological entry into the Christian community. Children were not seen as the church of tomorrow but forming part of the church of today (Methodist Church Conference Report 1993:3). To take the argument a step further, it is important to argue that, if baptism makes a person a member of the community, why then make further demands on a person to qualify by participating in the communion? This may lead to a point where the church needs to understand that children must be recognised and that they are not inferior beings in terms of virtue. On the other hand, this created a problem for many parents who felt that there was no need for children to be present, particularly when they were receiving the blessings during communion or sitting and observing at the moment of receiving communion (Methodist Church Conference Report 1993:3) by the adults.

The same experience of parents' feeling of incompleteness becomes an issue with children as they observe the communion service which excludes them from participation. This situation leads to children enquiring "Why?" This question need be understood in the context of children's perspective on the 'invitation only to those who love the Lord.' A child is equally capable of loving Jesus just as much as an adult. The sense they get from this is one of discrimination in that, only when it matters, are they not accepted (Methodist Church Conference Report 1993:3). This kind of discrimination could cause some negative results to develop in the mind of the child about the church. Michael Perry (1967:78) qualifies the argument through his experience that, during his childhood stage, before his confirmation, he was only taken to the early church service on a Sunday by his



parents. The situation has changed in his adulthood since he has found himself having to be at the communion with his children present on basically every Sunday of their lives. In such cases children were also allowed to come to the altar rail with their parents. This situation has led to the children asking an insistent question, "Why should we not take part in the communion with the rest of the family of God?" (Perry 1967:78). The indication was simply that the children were not ready for confirmation, but they *were* ready and wanted to participate in the communion with everyone else.

Perry's (1967:80) argument on the view of the Anglican Church about the baptised infants and children was also reflected in the report of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa which was in 1992, that children (baptised) need not be prevented from receiving the elements of the sacrament of Holy Communion especially when they were able to discern the *body of the Lord* before receiving it. Communion is not to be seen as a form of graduation ceremony but there should be a series of educational instruction classes for the children who were baptised at infancy, about the Christian truth. However, this would also be determined by the age at which these children were welcomed into communion and, of course, this varies according to the different churches.

## 7 JUSTIFICATION FOR THE INCLUSION OF THE CHILDREN IN THE COMMUNION

The inclusion of children in the Holy Communion gives a clear picture of the nature of the church which is an inclusive community of people of all ages. This should be a core act of the church in all its worship. Children are also able to make a positive response of faith which is appropriate to their age. This allows them to grow in faith as they participate in worship. They also need to be affirmed, welcomed and to enjoy the greater part of the worshipping community (Methodist Church Conference Report 1993:4). Acceptance in the acts of communion gives children a sense of belonging. Their participation in the communion means they can make a valid contribution to the life of the church. As a result, it is the responsibilities of Christian families to ensure that children participate in all the activities of the church.

## 8 CHRISTIAN FAMILIES

Christian families have a vital role to play in the growth and development of the faith of their children. This helps them to grow in appreciation and understanding of the importance of the Holy Communion. In many instances people learn better by practically doing and it is in this manner that children tend to understand through participation. Christian families will find that this enables them to share more fully in worship or fellowship because there will be no arbitrary breaking up of families for the holiest act of corporate church life (Methodist Church Conference Report 1993:4). For the African continent, the church might be more relevant to culture especially by placing an emphasis on the rites and celebration of the birth and the inclusion of children in the family. In the Methodist Church the 1992 Annual Conference resolved that doors should be opened for children to receive communion. However, certain guidelines were made clear. Some of these guidelines meant that children were to be in the company of their parents as they receive communion because this would help them feel at home and receive the elements appropriately (Methodist Church Conference Report 1993:6). In some families children may not have been baptised because parents felt that they could not make a response of faith, but may still want their children to receive the Holy Communion. In this case a child may be able to make a response of faith which will enable that child to receive the Holy Communion. Consequently, he or she (the child) should be baptised.

## 9 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, infant and child baptism seemed to be less important and this was unfortunate since there is only one baptism irrespective of age. Because of its relationship to the Eucharist, baptism in the church remains an important phenomenon. Child participation in the liturgies and the Holy Communion of the church remains a source of either confusion or division. In spite of all the arguments from the

Christian community about the role of the children in the church, there have been inconsistencies in the interpretation of the scriptural texts around the sacraments. Families play a central role in nurturing the faith of the children – therefore they should be in a position to allow them to participate in the Holy Communion without any form of prejudice. The argument that children need to be responsible first does not mean that they are without faith. It can be seen as an intellectual argument more than a faith statement. At the end of it all Christ did not institute either adult baptism or infant baptism. Christ instituted baptism, as he has once and for all ordained his creative Word that the saving effect of baptism shall exist and that gift of salvation shall accompany the act as often as it is administered. The Holy Communion needs to be understood as a fellowship in Christ by all those who are Christians and have been baptised. The Holy Communion was a meal which Christ shared with his disciples as a family, leaving behind an example to be followed by all Christians irrespective of their age. This therefore means that, in the end, families allow their children to partake of this Christian family meal in faith. This is a happy time for Christian families to share in the fellowship with one another and no-one should be excluded.

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