CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A CHURCH DIVIDED BY THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE:
THE CASE OF THE ADMISSION OF CHILDREN TO
COMMUNION IN THE CHURCH IN WALES

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SUMMARY

This study examines the way in which change in theology and practice
takes place in the Anglican Church by focusing on the case of the admis-
sion of children to communion through the eyes of clerics in the Church
in Wales. Surveys were conducted in 1993 and 2003, and to accommodate
the changed status of clergywomen between 1993 and 2003. The data
recorded is confined to clergymen. The chapter begins by examining the
classic locus of Anglican teaching on admission of children to communion,
and the ways in which the teaching has been challenged and modified by
Anglican reports and local practice since the publication of the influential
Ely Report in 1971. The chapter proceeds by proposing that changing
perspectives in Anglican teaching are likely to be mediated at the local
level through the personal beliefs and attitudes of the local parish cler-
ics who are often responsible for teaching the laity and for determining
local practice. In turn, it is maintained that the views of the local clergy
may be shaped both by personal factors and by churchmanship factors.
Regarding personal factors, it is likely that older clergy may be more
resistant to change than their younger colleagues. Regarding churchman-
ship factors, it is likely that Catholics and Evangelicals hold significantly
different views on key aspects of Christian initiation.

INTRODUCTION

The New Testament is not particularly helpful in providing informa-
tion about children and communion. Certainly there is evidence that
children were present at worship from the earliest times and this may
well have included the eucharist. Strange (1996) has suggested that
if the earliest Christians saw some similarities between the eucharist,
which commemorated the sacrifice of Christ whom Paul described as
‘our Passover Lamb’ (1 Corinthians 5:7), and the Passover celebration
already familiar to them, then we might expect that children would partake of the Christian meal as they had done of the Jewish one (Exodus 12:21–27). It is a fair point but lacks the support of solid evidence.

More revealing is the effect that another New Testament reference (John 6:53) would seem to have had upon St Augustine. John’s Gospel comment, that “unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood you can have no life in you”, appears to have persuaded St Augustine that there could be no halfway house between the baptised and the communicant. From this axiom, St Augustine built a powerful case for the admission of children to communion (Strange, 1996). The admission of children to communion in the Eastern Church became defined from this time onwards and remains so. In the West, however, the situation has been less straightforward and, despite Augustine’s weighty support, a combination of custom and theology have worked together against the acceptance of child communion.

By the late Middle Ages, a growing reverence for the sacrament of holy communion meant that the eucharist had become virtually a privilege for the priesthood. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that children were debarred from participation in the sacrament. Indeed, the place of children in the theme of things was prescribed in a detailed way when in AD 1215 the Fourth Lateran Council linked the taking of holy communion with the child’s arrival at years of discretion (Lowther Clarke, 1932). Thus the Council ruled that children should not be permitted to communion until they had arrived at an age which would allow them to distinguish clearly the elements of the communion from ordinary food. The appropriate age was initially thought to be around seven years, but was later pushed back to between ten and fourteen years. This was the first time a specific age was set on receiving communion.

Despite a good deal of subsequent repudiation of the theology of the Fourth Lateran Council, the Council’s ruling was reinforced by the Catholic Reformation of the sixteenth century and the Council of Trent condemned out of hand any suggestion of child communion. Holeton (1981) shows how in the Protestant Churches, despite sporadic efforts to revive the primitive practice of child communion, a pattern has developed for communion to be associated with the process of growing up, while Fisher and Yarnold (1989) demonstrate the manner in which the three parts of the rite of initiation (baptism, confirmation, and communion) became separated one from another. By the sixteenth century infant baptism had become so common that liturgical books