

I. Communion Before Confirmation

- For the first 1200 years of the Church's existence, children-including infants- received Holy Communion.
- The early church welcomed all baptized members regardless of age or status. Whilst there is no explicit mention of any special approach to the baptism of infants in the New Testament, they were included in the family or household and welcomed at the Eucharist.
- People preparing for Baptism or Confirmation in the early church were prepared very little, and then were baptized and confirmed at the vigil service of Easter. As new life was celebrated, they were baptized into new life. Only after this, and some weeks of receiving Communion, were they taught anything of the meaning. Thus they were able to consider what they had already experienced, and find its meaning in their own life.
- Baptism and confirmation began to be separated from one another because the bishops, who originally did both, did not have enough time to go around to all those wanting to be baptized or confirmed. It became accepted that any priest could baptize, but confirmation could only be by a bishop, as now. After a while, what was changed for practical reasons came to be justified on theological grounds. Communion was still related to baptism rather than confirmation.
- In the 11th Century, controversy arose about the Eucharistic presence. A by-product of that was that the Catholic Church withdrew the bread from children. In the following century, it was decided to withhold the cup from all lay people, partly as a distinction from the Orthodox Church. Thus, children had no way to receive Communion at all. The Orthodox Church baptized and confirmed babies as part of one service, and all infants received Communion. This is still their practice.
- When the western church split in the 16th Century into Roman Catholic and Protestant churches, young children remained excluded from Communion. Protestants reinforced the exclusion with their emphasis on understanding of the faith and on personal salvation and

commitment. They introduced catechism classes before confirmation, and these were not offered to small children. In the Roman Catholic Church, baptised children received Communion at around the age of 7, and were then confirmed at about 11. This is still their practice.

- From the 16th to the 19th centuries, most children who had been baptized as babies received Communion after some teaching by the parish priest. It was only in the 19th Century that confirmation became the familiar 'gateway' to Communion that we now think has always been the pattern. Anglicans have thus inherited a belief that children could not be admitted to Communion before being 'instructed' and confirmed.
- The Book of Common Prayer states that 'There shall be none admitted to Communion other than they be confirmed or desirous of being confirmed'.
- In the 1960s, General Synod and the House of Bishops declared 'Baptism is the complete sacramental initiation' and therefore it makes us full members of the Body of Christ.
- In the 1970s a few provinces within the Anglican Communion admitted children to Communion on this principle. Three dioceses in the Church of England received permission to experiment. In 1993 they all reported that those parishes concerned were all 'convinced of the positive value of admitting children.'
- Since the 1970s there has also been extensive research into children's spirituality, faith development and the place of children in the church. We have come to realize the depth of faith children can have, and the natural nature of their relationship with Jesus. It is evident that children are able to experience depth and meaning in the use of symbol and sacraments.
- In March 1997 the House of Bishops of the Church of England issued guidelines for the admission of children to Communion before Confirmation. This is now the practice within all but 2 of the dioceses.