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The Age of Admission to Communion

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THE STARTING POINT of this essay is an impressive article by the Rev. C. O. Buchanan entitled 'An Anglican Evangelical Looks at Sacramental Initiation', which appeared in the issue of *Faith and Unity* for May 1968. Many have lately urged (sometimes for pastoral, sometimes for antiquarian reasons) that our present Anglican pattern of Christian initiation needs reform,¹ but Colin Buchanan's article is noteworthy as approaching the subject theologically, as proceeding upon evangelical presuppositions, and as presenting a case for infant communion. His case for infant communion needs to be seen in relation to his other contentions, however. He makes four main points:

(i) He stresses the rightness of baptising the infant children of Christian parents, by which he means the infant children of communicants (who have earlier professed their faith and been baptised).

(ii) He also stresses the rightness of using categorical language about the effects of baptism, seeing that, under the proper conditions (as part of the evangelization of households), baptism effects what it signifies.

(iii) He goes on to urge that, since regeneration and the gift of the Spirit are a unity, and the New Testament evidence for confirmation is so slight, it is a mistake to try to attach any part of the sacramental significance of baptism to confirmation, and it would therefore be better if those baptised as adults were not confirmed as well. Confirmation should be retained for those baptised as infants, but strictly on the Reformers' understanding of it, as a ratification of baptismal obligations.

(iv) Finally, he argues that the age for confirmation ought to be raised from what it is at present (twelve to fourteen) to about sixteen, but that it should be separated from admission to communion, which should instead be combined with baptism. If this were done, a child of Christian parents, having been baptised as an infant, would be 'in principle admissible to communion with his parents' (the exact age at

which he started to receive being 'at their discretion', however). A child of non-Christian parents, on the other hand, would be baptised only when he or his parents professed faith, and would be admitted to communion at whatever age the profession was made.

In all this, Mr. Buchanan is consciously following in the footsteps of the National Evangelical Anglican Congress at Keele,³ though often going beyond it. With regard to point (i), the Keele Statement likewise supports the baptism of children of Christian parents, but, though stressing the importance of baptismal discipline, does not actually define 'Christian parents' as meaning communicant parents (para. 71). In an age like the present, when the divorce between the national profession of Christianity and the actual practice of most Englishmen has become so great, a discipline which declines to baptise indiscriminately the children of all and sundry would seem to be necessary. If the parents and sponsors cannot make the baptismal professions with understanding or sincerity, and lack the intention or ability to give the child a Christian upbringing, it is difficult to believe that the Christian nation can any longer supply their deficiencies. Again, when one asks what is the best objective test whether a parent is a practising Christian or not, Mr. Buchanan's answer of regular reception of communion would seem to be the right one. It is for the Church to provide the liturgical and disciplinary conditions in which reception of communion is not isolated from attendance upon the ministry of the word or nullified by flagrantly wicked conduct. At the same time, proper pastoral provision must be made for those whose children are thus excluded from baptism, otherwise the national Church will become just another sect and will lose its contact with a great many possible converts. It will also fail to display Christ's welcoming attitude towards little children.

With regard to point (ii), the Keele Statement is unduly nervous (para. 71), though for easily understandable reasons. The categorical language of the New Testament about the effects of baptism is matched by its equally categorical language about the effects of God's revealed word and of the faith which God's word evokes. Regeneration, the gift of the Spirit, the forgiveness of sins, and putting on of Christ and of sonship are on the one hand said to be effects of baptism (Jn. 3: 5; Tit. 3: 5; Acts 2: 38; 22: 16; Gal. 3: 27) and on the other hand to be effects of God's word and of faith (Jam. 1: 18; 1 Pet. 1: 23-25; Jn. 1: 12f.; Gal. 3: 2, 14; Eph. 1: 13; Acts 13: 38f.; Gal. 3: 26). Mr. Buchanan's proviso that only in the context of evangelism does baptism effect what it signifies is therefore all-important.

With regard to point (iii), the Keele Statement is in general agreement with what Mr. Buchanan says, but recommends that the confirmation of those baptised as adults should be combined with their baptism rather than dispensed with altogether (para. 73). A case can be made out for this alternative. Though the Reformers were primarily con-

cerned with Scripture and with edification, they did not intend to break all links between confirmation as they practised it and confirmation in earlier Christian history: indeed, they supposed that, by linking the laying-on of hands with a ratification of baptismal professions, they were restoring the patristic mode of administering confirmation, as the rubrics at the beginning of the Catechism (until their revision in 1662) showed.⁸ Nor did the Reformers refuse to recognise an analogy between the confirmation they practised and the practice of New Testament times, as the phrase in the Confirmation service 'after the example of thy holy apostles' indicates. In the New Testament confirmation is not commanded, and consequently it cannot be insisted on as an obligation of all Christians or as some sort of condition of receiving the benefits of baptism; but it may be exemplified, in Acts 8, Acts 19 and Heb. 6. And though the Reformers were mistaken in thinking there to be evidence that in patristic times baptism and confirmation were, for the Reformers' own reasons, kept separate (which is why their statement to this effect was corrected in 1662), yet if Acts 8 is an example of confirmation, the ceremony is undoubtedly separate from baptism there. Moreover, the special circumstances which cause the separation in Acts 8 (the delay in the granting of the charismatic gifts) are matched by the special circumstances which now cause the separation in the case of infants (the fact that they cannot yet confess their faith in person). On the other hand, there are no such special circumstances in the case of those baptised as adults, and consequently in their case there is no reason for keeping the two kindred ceremonies apart, especially as this involves them in reaffirming only shortly after their baptism the declarations which they have already, at baptism, made in person.

Coming on now to point (iv), the thoughts expressed by the Keele Statement on this matter are as follows:

'We call for further theological study as to whether the age of discretion is always the right time for admission to Holy Communion. Some of us would like the children of Christian families to be admitted as communicants at an early age, provided that there is adequate baptismal discipline' (para. 74).

Mr. Buchanan's article is a contribution towards this 'further theological study', from one who would himself 'like the children of Christian families to be admitted as communicants at an early age'. The present article is offered as another contribution towards this 'further theological study', from one who would *not* 'like the children of Christian families to be admitted as communicants' so early. But both articles concentrate on 'theological' considerations, as basic. For a proper evaluation of psychological and sociological factors, and even of pastoral factors, readers must look elsewhere.

Arguments in favour of Infant Communion

IN support of the propriety of infant communion, Mr. Buchanan uses two arguments:

(a) 'The practice of confirmation at 12-14 springs from the Reformers' slightly over-intellectualised conception of necessary qualifications. Their fondness for strict catechising was a reaction against the gross superstition in which they had been brought up. They were surely right in looking for ratification of baptismal obligations at mature years, but excessive in their insistence that "all the right answers" were necessary before admission to communion.

(b) 'In simple terms, the baptised person is a Christian, and the Christian is a communicant. Thus a baptised babe is in principle admissible to communion *with his parents* (and the exact age he starts is at their discretion). The child then grows as a recipient of the means of grace, and as a participant in the life of the community.'

These arguments have since been echoed in the course of some exchanges on the subject in the *Church of England Newspaper*, and a third argument has there been added:

(c) Infant communion is on the same footing as infant baptism. The arguments that hold for the latter hold for the former also, and the objections to the former are no different in character and no greater in force than the objections to the latter.

As regards argument (a), it could reasonably be questioned whether the Reformers are really responsible for the popular idea that the years twelve to fourteen are the right age for confirmation, or whether to raise the age to sixteen (as Mr. Buchanan proposes) would be any improvement. The age suggested by the opening words of the 1662 Confirmation service, and by the rubrics which formerly introduced the Catechism, is very indefinite: the one thing that is quite clear is that it excludes infant confirmation, which (unlike infant communion) was still a live issue in England on the eve of the Reformation.⁴ The 1603 Canons may express the intention of the Prayer Book, however, when they require everyone to be confirmed by the age of sixteen (Canon 112). If so, the Reformers were not aiming at the age of puberty so much as at the age of early adolescence—the same age as is proposed by Mr. Buchanan. But both puberty and adolescence are ages of instability, and it is reasonable to hold that it would be better to locate confirmation outside both these periods. The age of puberty varies in different climates and environments, but ranges from the ages of eleven to fourteen in girls and from the ages of thirteen to sixteen in boys. Adolescence extends from the age of puberty to the age of maturity. The question thus arises whether the better period for confirmation is from about the age of ten downwards or from about the age of eighteen upwards. But if the Reformers were right in their view that confirmation should provide for the 'ratification of baptismal obligations at

mature years', as Mr. Buchanan thinks they were, then there can be no doubt that the latter period is preferable to the former.⁵

In Mr. Buchanan's view, however, the age of confirmation ought not to control the age of admission to communion, since the Reformers had a 'slightly overintellectualised conception of necessary qualifications' for the latter, and were 'excessive in their insistence that "all the right answers" were necessary' first. But if infant communion is appropriate, then the necessary qualifications for admission to communion are not intellectual at all, and the Reformers' conception of necessary qualifications was not just 'slightly overintellectualised' but was completely wrong. What the Reformers ought, in this case, to have said is that a measure of understanding and a true faith are necessary conditions for admission to communion in those who are old enough to be capable of them, but that in the case of the infants of Christian parents they are as completely dispensable for the time being as they are in relation to baptism. Yet Mr. Buchanan seems, for some reason, to be unwilling to go this far. What he seems to be saying is that the Reformers demanded too much in the way of intellectual qualifications, but that intellectual qualifications ought not to be dispensed with altogether. 'All the right answers' are not necessary, as the Reformers thought, but a genuine faith is. He consequently goes on to say that 'a baptised babe is *in principle* admissible to communion with his parents' but that 'the exact age he starts is *at their discretion*' (italics ours). To say this, however, is to abandon the case for infant communion. It is as much as to say that quite young children are capable of the necessary faith, but that infants are not.

This leads us on naturally to argument (b), which Mr. Buchanan himself has by now virtually answered. 'The baptised person is a Christian,' he says, 'and the Christian is a communicant.' But what he surely should have said is that the baptised *and believing* person is a Christian, and the Christian is a communicant; or, if he wants to confine himself wholly to externals, that the baptised person *who has heard the word of the gospel and confessed his faith* is a Christian, and the Christian is a communicant. The disjunction which Mr. Buchanan here makes between the ministry of the sacraments and the ministry of the word, as if the outward form of the Church were complete without the latter, is a very dangerous error, which he has guarded against in other parts of his article, but which, once admitted, would in principle overthrow both the Reformation and the Christian gospel. In reply, it might be asked whether the baptised infant is not to be regarded as a Christian? The right answer to this is that in a sense he is a Christian, but not in the full sense: he is a potential Christian only. The sacraments are not even in outward terms complete apart from the ministry of the word, and in inward terms all the effects of the sacraments are also attributed by Scripture to the ministry of the word and the faith which the word evokes (as we saw above with regard to

baptism), and are not to be expected in isolation from the ministry of the word and faith, except in abnormal cases such as that of the baptised infant who dies in infancy. In normal cases, the faith of the parent will suffice the baptised infant in his infancy, but it cannot suffice him any longer when he grows up and is himself under the sound of the word.

Argument (c) is of Baptist origin. The main grounds for infant baptism are the fact that babes are said by our Lord to be the characteristic candidates for the kingdom of heaven (to which baptism is a means of entry); the fact that the solidarity of the family as a unit of God's people is as prominent in the Acts and the Epistles as it is in the Old Testament; and the fact that the Jewish background to baptism lies primarily in the ceremony of circumcision, which was for infants as well as adults. From these facts it is deduced that, in baptism as in circumcision, the faith of the candidate can be dispensed with until he is older. Ancillary arguments are that infants are as capable of a washing with water as are adults, and that infant baptism can be traced so far back in Christian history that there is no difficulty in believing that it goes back to apostolic times. Now, Baptist controversialists contend that the arguments from membership of the kingdom of heaven and from the solidarity of the family apply with equal force to the Holy Communion; that the Jewish background to the Holy Communion lies primarily in participation of the passover, which was for infants as well as adults; that infants can easily consume a little bread and wine; and that infant communion, no less than infant baptism, can be traced back to very ancient times. It follows, so they say, that paedobaptists ought either to admit that the case for infant baptism is inadequate, or to adopt the practice of infant communion as well. Faced with this dilemma, it appears that some Anglican Evangelicals are choosing the latter option in preference to the former. What they ought rather to have done is to have tested the validity of the Baptist contentions before agreeing to accept the dilemma at all. They would then have found, as we shall find shortly, that the last three of the five alleged parallels between infant baptism and infant communion are fallacious, and that the remaining two, though they would have weight if they were the only relevant considerations, are quite inadequate to sustain a case for infant communion in face of the evidence that communion is not intended for infants.

Arguments against Infant Communion

TURNING now to arguments against infant communion, it must be granted at the outset that not all the arguments commonly urged against it can be pressed. The argument that, in view of the institution narrative, communicants must be capable of remembering Christ's

death (Lk. 22: 19; 1 Cor. 11: 24-26), and that in view of the teaching of St. Paul, they must be capable of examining themselves and of discerning the Lord's body (1 Cor. 11: 27-31), is no more conclusive against infant communion than the argument that candidates for baptism must be capable of repenting and believing (Acts 2: 38; 19: 4f.; Gal. 3: 26f.; Col. 2: 12f.) is conclusive against infant baptism. In either case, the repentance and faith of senior members of the same family, and the prospect of the candidates' own future repentance and faith, might be sufficient grounds for admitting them to the sacrament as infants. No use will therefore be made of arguments such as these.

Before proceeding to arguments of a more decisive kind, it will be helpful to establish in advance that the natural distinctions of age are recognised in the Bible and its background literature, and thus have significance for those who seek to think biblically. We may begin by remarking that, from about the time of Joseph onwards, the length of men's lives in the biblical narrative is much as it is today. Joseph, Aaron, Moses and Joshua all lived to great ages (Gen. 50: 26; Num. 33: 39; Deut. 34: 7; Josh. 24: 29), but not to ages that are absolutely unknown in modern times. It seems that from this period the principle laid down in Ps. 90: 10 (cp. 2 Sam. 19: 32) applies, that

'The days of our years are threescore years and ten,

Or even by reason of strength fourscore years.'

Within this lifetime of seventy or eighty years, the Bible distinguishes various stages. There is first the stage of infancy or early childhood, a stage of complete dependence on others, before the arrival of either discernment or speech. The infant cannot distinguish between what is beneficial and what is harmful (Deut. 1: 39; 1 Kings 3: 7-9; Is. 7: 15f.; Heb. 5: 13f.).⁶ He cannot even say 'My father' or 'My mother' (Is. 8: 4). Consequently, in the inter-testamental literature, the phrase 'of feebler soul than a babe' comes to mean 'most foolish' (Wisdom 15: 14).

The second stage is childhood, when education becomes possible (Deut. 6: 7; 11: 19; Prov. 22: 6; 29: 17; Eph. 6: 4) but understanding is still in an immature state (1 Cor. 13: 11; 14: 20; Eph. 4: 14). The child is therefore not well fitted to exercise authority (Eccles. 10: 16; Is. 3: 4), and is not left free to make his own decisions or to dispose of his own property (Gal. 4: 1f.).

Finally, the stage of manhood is reached. This appears to be attained at about the age of twenty. Josiah is 'yet a boy' at sixteen (2 Chr. 34: 1-3). At twenty, however, one reaches one's full strength and begins one's working life in earnest (Lev. 27: 1-7; 1 Chr. 27: 23). Military service begins at this age (Num. 1: 3, 20, 22, 24 etc.; 26: 2; 1 Chr. 27: 23). As a special concession, the Mosaic Law rules that the Levites do not begin their working life until twenty-five (Num. 8: 23-26), but at other periods they begin at twenty like everybody else (1 Chr. 23: 24, 27; Ezr. 3: 8). Twenty is the age at which it becomes one's duty

to offer the half-shekel (Ex. 30: 14; 38: 26). It also appears to be the age of accountability (Num. 14: 29-31; 32: 11). Manhood is the time for marriage: kings, perhaps for political reasons, sometimes married very early,⁷ but Joseph married at about the age of thirty (Gen. 41: 45-50) and Moses, so Stephen says, at about the age of forty (Acts 7: 23-29); and similarly, in the inter-testamental literature, Tobit says

'when I became a man, I took to wife Anna' (Tobit 1: 9).

Manhood, likewise, is the time of mature discernment and understanding (1 Cor. 13: 11; 14: 20; Heb. 5: 14). This is not to say that understanding may not further increase with years, but until manhood begins it is not considered to be mature at all.

When we turn to the Dead Sea Scrolls and the (post-biblical) rabbinical literature, we find there a general similarity to this account of the stages of life, but with further refinements. In the document which T. H. Gaster calls a 'Manual of Discipline for the Future Congregation of Israel' we read:

'Every person is to be trained from childhood in the Book of Study, to be enlightened (so far as his age permits) in the various provisions of the Covenant and to be schooled in its various injunctions for a period of ten years, after which (i.e. at the age of fifteen?) he is to be liable to the regulations regarding the several degrees of purity. At twenty, he is to undergo an examination preparatory to his admission by vote, as a constituent member of his family, to the council of the holy community. He is not to have carnal knowledge of woman until he is twenty years old and has reached the age of discretion. Furthermore, it is only then that he is to be eligible to give testimony in matters involving the Laws of the Torah or to attend judicial hearings. At twenty-five, he is to take his place in the formal structure of the holy community and be eligible for communal office. At thirty, he may take part in litigation and in rendering judgments and may occupy a position on the staff of the militia—that is, as the captain of a battalion etc. . . . If public notice is posted for a juridical or consultative assembly, or if notice of war be posted, everyone is to observe a three-day period of personal sanctification, so that anyone who presents himself on any of these occasions may come duly prepared. This refers to men over twenty. . . .'

(The Scriptures of the Dead Sea Sect, London, Secker and Warburg, 1957, p. 285f.).

It will be noted here that twenty is the age of discretion, of marriage, of giving legal testimony and of military service. The laws of ritual purity become obligatory somewhat earlier, and responsibilities of a special kind are reserved for the age of twenty-five or thirty. The age of offering sacrifice is not stated, but this also may be inferred to be twenty, since this was the legal age for offering the half-shekel (Ex. 30: 14; 38: 26), and according to the Book of Jubilees (to which the

Qumran community adhered), it was also the age for participating in the passover (Jub. 49: 17).

The basic statement of the Mishnah is the following:

‘At five years old one is fit for Scripture, at ten years for the Mishnah, at thirteen for the fulfilling of the commandments, at fifteen for the Talmud, at eighteen for the bridechamber, at twenty for pursuing a calling, at thirty for authority, at forty for discernment, at fifty for counsel, at sixty for to be an elder, at seventy for grey hairs, at eighty for special strength, at ninety for bowed back, and at a hundred a man is as one that has already died and passed away and ceased from the world’ (Aboth 5: 21).

In this statement, the age for marriage⁸ and the age for pursuing a calling are much as we should expect them to be from the other evidence at which we have been looking, but the age of thirteen for the fulfilling of the commandments and the age of forty for discernment are at first sight surprising. The latter, however, must undoubtedly refer not to the age of discretion but to advancing years, with the superior wisdom which they bring: it is not conceivable that the Mishnah means that men are fit for authority before the age of discretion, and in fact it is clear from other passages of the Mishnah that the age of discretion is the age at which one becomes subject to the commandments, i.e. thirteen. There are three types of person, constantly classed together by the Mishnah, who are not subject to the commandments—a deaf-mute, an imbecile and a minor (Rosh ha-Shanah 3: 8). A minor is consequently one below the age of thirteen, the age at which one is ‘fit for the fulfilling of the commandments’. A minor is actually prohibited from performing ceremonial commandments (Menahoth 9: 8; Hullin 1: 1; Parah 5: 4). Moreover, a minor is not accountable for transgressing the commandments (Baba Kamma 4: 4; 8: 4). And the reason for all this is that a minor lacks understanding (Arakhin 1: 1; Tohoroth 3: 6; Makshirin 3: 8; 6: 1). It is clear, therefore, that in the Mishnah the age of discretion has been pushed down to thirteen, even lower than the age at which the Dead Sea Scrolls impose the laws of ceremonial purity, and that at this age the Mishnah imposes not just those laws but all the Law.

It is against this background, biblical and historical, that the institution of the Lord’s Supper must be seen, and the question of the intended age of admission to it considered.

The Age of Admission to The Passover

THE time of the institution of the Lord’s Supper, as all the gospels make clear, was the season of the passover, and Joachim Jeremias has persuasively argued that it was instituted at the actual passover meal.⁹ The passover meal was a feast upon the sacrificed passover lamb, and

the Lord's Supper is represented by our Lord as a feast upon his own body and blood, that is to say, upon himself, sacrificially slain. Moreover, our Lord is explicitly represented by St. Paul as fulfilling the type of the sacrificed passover lamb (1 Cor. 5: 7). There can be no doubt, therefore, that the immediate background against which the Lord's Supper must be understood is the feast of the passover.

Now, it seems to be widely assumed that the passover meal in the time of Jesus was a domestic occasion, like the original passover in Egypt or the Jewish passover of today. What is forgotten is that in the time of Jesus the Temple was still standing, and Palestinian Jews went up to Jerusalem for the passover, in accordance with the law of Deut. 16: 5-7.¹⁰ To go up to Jerusalem for the passover was incumbent only upon males (Ex. 23: 17; 34: 23; Deut. 16: 16), and only upon those among them who had reached the age for the fulfilling of the commandments. Consequently, we find the Book of Jubilees, in the second century B.C., confining participation in the passover meal to those who have attained the age of twenty:

'And every man who hath come upon its day shall eat it in the sanctuary of your God before the Lord from twenty years old and upwards' (Jub. 49: 17).

How representative of the practice of its time the Book of Jubilees is, we do not know, but even if women and children accompanied their menfolk to Jerusalem at that period and earlier, as Josephus believed (*Antiquities* 11:4:8, 109f.), there is no certainty that they took part in the passover meal itself, which was only one element in the week's festivities. In the first century AD we have further evidence of women and children going up to Jerusalem for the festival (Lk. 2: 41-43), and by this time women certainly did partake of the passover meal (Josephus, *Jewish War* 6:9:3, 426; cp. also Mishnah, Pesahim 8:1, 5, 7), though even in the Talmud we find rabbis contending that women are under no obligation to do so (Pesahim 79b, 91b). The earliest evidence for participation by minors is found in the Mishnah (Pesahim 8: 7; 10: 4), and J. B. Segal warns us not to read back the domestic details of the passover as the Mishnah describes them into the period when the passover was still sacrificed at the Temple. In his view, minors did not partake before AD 70, and when Jesus was taken up to Jerusalem at the age of twelve, it was in order to prepare him for admission to the passover at the age of discretion, a year later (cp. Mishnah, Yoma 8: 4). The Samaritan practice of admitting infants and imbeciles, if it goes back so far, was a sectarian peculiarity.¹¹ Certainly, there is no evidence in the Mishnah for participation by infants, and even if what the Mishnah says about children partaking is true of the time of Christ, there is no reason to think that this applies to infants also. On the contrary, the Mishnah rules that no-one is to be a member of a passover-company unless he is capable of eating an olive's bulk of the flesh

(Pesahim 8: 7). Consequently, infant communion, unlike infant baptism, has no background in the practice of the Jews.

The Age for Eating Bread and Drinking Wine

A SECOND fallacious parallel between infant baptism and infant communion, urged by opponents of the former and supporters of the latter, lies in the outward elements and ceremonial of the sacraments. If infants are as capable as adults of receiving an outward washing with water, so it is argued, they are as capable as adults of eating a little bread and drinking a little wine. Even at this level the parallel is open to objection, for infants are not capable of eating solid food, as the New Testament itself remarks (1 Cor. 3: 1f.; Heb. 5: 12-14). Consequently, in places where infant communion has been practised, it has become customary either to give them a sop of bread dipped in wine (which is the practice of the Eastern Orthodox Church to this day) or to give them a drop of wine without the bread.¹² But it is not simply a question of what infants are capable of, it is a question of what is suitable for them. If our Lord instituted the Holy Communion in elements that are obviously unsuitable for infants, he was not taxing the ingenuity of the Church with finding ways in which infants could be enabled to receive unsuitable foodstuffs, but was giving the Church a clear indication that the sacrament was not intended for infants. Bread is solid food, and was therefore not intended for infants. Wine is an intoxicant, and was therefore not intended for infants or for children. Even to speak of 'a little' bread and wine is a quite arbitrary inference from later Church practice, after the Holy Communion had been separated from the agape. At the Last Supper, the Holy Communion was part of a feast, in which there is no reason to think that either the bread or the wine was stinted.¹³

These statements can be backed up with a good deal of biblical and Jewish evidence. The food of infants has always been milk, and it is worth remarking that in biblical times it was their food until a much later age than is customary in the west today. In 1 Sam. 1: 22-2:11, the newly weaned Samuel seems to be represented as capable of ministering to the Lord before Eli. Is. 28: 9 seems to mean that the newly weaned are ready to be educated. 2 Maccabees 7: 27 speaks of suckling for three years from birth as if it were normal. The Talmud gives two years as the normal period, but says that extension to four or five years is permissible (Ketuboth 60a; Niddah 9a). Philo even supposes that Isaac was weaned at the age of seven (*De Sobrietate* 8), and the Book of Jubilees may assert that he was weaned at the age of nine (Jub. 17: 1)! However, these are efforts of historical imagination which possibly have something to do with the longevity of the patriarchs. In any case, there is a textual difficulty in the passage from Jubilees, and Philo

elsewhere supposes that weaning precedes the development of teeth—which look like a typical example of male ignorance (*De Specialibus Legibus* 3: 199f.)! However this may be, it is quite clear that by modern western standards the age of weaning was late, and consequently that if we today do not think of bread as food for infants, still less would our Lord's contemporaries have done so.

As regards wine, the Bible seems to contain no instance of infants or children being permitted to drink it.¹⁴ The Old Testament gives a clear reason for this by teaching that wine needs to be treated with discretion (Prov. 20: 1; 21: 17; Is. 5: 11-13; 56: 10-12), since discretion is precisely what infants and children lack. As we saw earlier, according to biblical ideas infants cannot distinguish between what is good for them and what is bad for them, and children also are very deficient in understanding. The same account of children, as we also saw, is given by the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Mishnah. And even when the Mishnah represents children as taking part in the passover meal, it gives no hint that they share in the cups of wine. In Pesahim 10: 4, when the son asks 'Why do we eat this?', 'Why do we eat that?', he mentions almost everything on the passover table except the cups of wine. However, it seems likely that at the period of the Mishnah the obligation to partake of the passover wine was beginning to be extended to children: hence the controversy on the point later recorded in the Talmud (Pesahim 108b-109a).

The Origin of Infant Communion

A THIRD fallacious parallel between infant communion and infant baptism is the allegation that they are of similar antiquity in the Christian Church. In the early third century A.D., there are unmistakable references to infant baptism in the writings of Hippolytus and Origen, and in the late second century in the writings of Irenaeus and Tertullian. Moreover, implicit references in earlier writers suggest that the practice goes back at least as far as the late first century.¹⁵ Taken in conjunction with the other evidence, this makes it easy to believe that infant baptism dates from apostolic times. With infant communion, things are quite different. The first supposed reference to it is in the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus in the early third century, and this is quite uncertain: all that Hippolytus explicitly says is that little children are among those baptised, not that they are among those confirmed or those receiving communion. The first clear references to infant communion are in a treatise by Cyprian (*On the Lapsed* 9, 25), written in the mid third century, at a time when Origen is denying that infants receive communion (*Homilies on the Book of Judges* 6: 2). The first clear references to infant confirmation are of later date still. But what is even more significant about the evidence

of Cyprian than its lateness and its incompatibility with the evidence of Origen, is the fact that elsewhere in Cyprian's writings (*On the Lord's Prayer* 18; *Testimonies against the Jews* 3: 25f.) we find him using the great argument that was later urged by Augustine and others in defence of infant communion, viz. that according to Jn. 6: 53 reception of Holy Communion is necessary to salvation. Cyprian does not explicitly link this argument with the practice of infant communion, but it is entirely probable that the link already existed, and if so we need search no longer for the origin of infant communion. It arose out of a special interpretation of Jn. 6: 53. But if this is how infant communion arose, it fully explains the absence of earlier patristic evidence for the practice, which would be strange if it really went back to the first century. It also explains the inconsistency of the practice with the biblical and Jewish evidence at which we have been looking.

The Pre-requisite of Baptism

TO these three arguments from supposed similarities, but actual contrasts, between infant communion and infant baptism, a fourth argument against infant communion may be added. It is admitted on all hands that baptism is a pre-requisite for admission to communion. This may be inferred from the initiatory significance of baptism, from the sequence observed in Acts 2: 41f. and 1 Cor. 10: 1-4, and from the relation between the Old Testament antecedents of the two sacraments (Ex. 12: 43f.). But it was noted earlier that the same effects which the New Testament attributes to baptism it also attributes to the proclamation of the word and to faith. Now faith, so the New Testament teaches, results from the proclamation of the word. It follows that the half-conscious emotion of dependence on its mother, or even on God and Christ, which one might imagine an infant to have, is not biblical faith. Some have supposed that our Lord endorses this conception of faith when he declares babes to be the characteristic candidates for the kingdom of heaven (Lk. 18: 15-17), but it is more likely their helplessness that he has in view. The New Testament idea of faith is not an instinctive emotion of dependence. As the New Testament sees the matter, people believe on Christ 'through the apostles' word' (Jn. 17: 20); 'faith comes from hearing and hearing through the message about Christ' (Rom. 10: 17); people are sealed with the Holy Spirit when they have 'heard the word of the truth, the gospel of their salvation' and have 'also believed' (Eph. 1: 13). But if the ministry of the word and the faith it evokes are required before the effects of baptism can be looked for, then initiation is not completed by the sacramental sign alone. On the contrary, in certain passages of the New Testament baptism is explicitly linked with the word or faith or repentance (the constant concomitant of faith) as *joint means*

of the graces which it effects (Acts 2: 38; Eph. 5: 26; Col. 2: 12f.). In the last of these passages, baptism itself is actually stated to take effect 'through faith'. In other passages of the New Testament, 'to be baptised' and 'to believe' or 'faith' are interchangeable expressions (Acts 19: 4f.; Gal. 3: 26f.). Consequently, although the extension of baptism to infants is legitimate, and is also beneficial to them in that baptism (like circumcision) brings them within the circle of those to whom 'the oracles of God are committed' (Rom. 3: 1-4), yet their baptism must never be thought of as a thing complete in itself. Only when they have learned from the oracles of God and have believed in Christ (cp. 2 Tim. 3: 15) can their baptism be considered to have been efficacious. It may have been complete without the laying on of hands, but it was not complete without the ministry of the word. The word and the faith it evokes are integral to baptism, so if baptism is a pre-requisite of admission to communion, teaching and a profession of faith are pre-requisites also. But if this is so, there can be no admission of infants to communion, for infants (as the Bible, we saw, truly represents them) lack both perception and speech.

The consequences of failing to observe these priorities are serious. 'Under the Eastern system,' J. D. C. Fisher points out, 'a person may be initiated into all the privileges of the Christian religion with their attendant responsibilities without ever having personally renounced Satan or confessed his faith in the Trinity.'¹⁸ A communicant is, in sacramental terms, a committed and practising Christian. Sacramentally speaking, he is abiding in Christ. But to treat infants as committed and practising Christians is to degrade instruction, faith and obedience to the level of optional extras, and is the most likely way conceivable of fostering a purely formal Christianity and of increasing the present number of lapsed communicants. Nor would it help matters much to keep confirmation (i.e. the ratification of baptismal professions) at the age of discretion, or to identify the age of discretion more accurately. For if confirmation were no longer admission to communion, it would be much harder to persuade people that they needed to be confirmed, and confirmation preparation, to which Evangelicals attach so much pastoral and evangelistic importance, would cease to have a significant place in the life of the Church. Conscious of the inappropriateness of urging a further initiation rite upon those who were already communicants, the clergy would be likely to abandon the vain attempt all the sooner. When that happened, however, the Church would be faced with the choice of either retracing its steps and abolishing infant communion, or surrendering to a mechanical view of the efficacy of baptism, according to which no ratification of baptismal professions is necessary, since the faith and repentance of those who were baptised as infants can be taken for granted.

The Alternatives to Infant Communion

BUT if the case for infant communion is so weak and the objections to it so serious, what are the alternatives? The alternatives are (i) adult communion, (ii) child communion, (iii) something between the two (such as we have at present), or (iv) the complete abolition of rules about age. In considering these possible courses, we will, as before, just touch on the pastoral factors relative to each, but will concentrate on the theological factors. The theological factors are in each case the same as in the case of infant communion; it is only the application of the factors which differs.

Taking the four alternatives in reverse order, course (iv) would not only create considerable perplexities for pastors and potential communicants, but would have to be modified if any age (e.g. infancy) could be theologically proved to be quite unsuitable for admission to communion, and abandoned if any age (e.g. adulthood) could be theologically proved to be the one suitable age. Discussion of this course can therefore be deferred, and may prove unnecessary.

Course (iii), the current practice, may be pastorally appropriate in particular cases, even if admission to communion in adulthood or in childhood is in fact the norm. Children grow up at different speeds, and it is therefore reasonable to allow some flexibility of practice. It is difficult to see, however, what justification there can be for making a period of rapid development and turmoil like puberty or adolescence the normal time, either for confirmation or for admission to communion. Certainly, conversions very frequently take place at this period, and one would not wish to refuse to those who professed conversion the opportunity of publicly ratifying their baptismal declarations, provided they fully understood what this involved, or of receiving a means of grace like the Holy Communion, if this were manifestly suited to their condition. But since puberty and adolescence, like earlier childhood, are essentially periods of immaturity, and are viewed in this way by the Bible, confirmation or admission to communion at these ages, as the normal practice, is open to any theological objections which can be urged against confirmation or admission to communion in earlier childhood, even if they cannot be urged against it with the same force.

This brings us on to consider course (ii) and the issue of child communion. It is really child communion at which Mr. Buchanan and those who think like him seem to be aiming, though the arguments they use relate properly to infant communion. What has brought the question of child communion to the fore is perhaps the growth of family communion services, at which children sometimes remain throughout. This naturally leads people to ask whether the service is training the children present for the day when they will be ready to be admitted to communion, or whether they could be admitted here and

now. For the former purpose it hardly seems necessary for children to be present throughout the service every Sunday, but does this mean that after the first part of the service they ought usually to leave for a Sunday School class, or is the present age of admission to communion too high? Now that so many are working for the reform of indiscriminate baptism and premature confirmation, would it be right to make a further reform and admit children to communion?

In the earlier part of this essay, we have looked at the various theological considerations bearing on the age of admission to communion and have seen that they exclude the communion of infants. What is their application to child communion, however? Some of them (the eligibility of babes for the kingdom of heaven, and the doubtful matter of the admission of children to the passover) either have no definite relevance to children or give only ambiguous guidance about them. But there are three considerations which bear directly on child communion, and to which we must now address our attention once again.

The first is that wine is represented in the Bible as a drink unsuitable for children, because of their lack of discretion. One may therefore presume that our Lord did not intend for children a sacrament instituted in wine, especially as he instituted it in the context of a feast, where there was no question of participants being limited to a mere sip. This attitude to wine was certainly shared by some of the rabbis mentioned in the Talmud, who strongly opposed the tendency which manifested itself about the second century AD to make children partake of the passover wine. Their argument, like ours, was simply that wine is not a suitable drink for children.

The second consideration is the origin of child communion. Child communion cannot be traced any further back in Christian history than infant communion. Indeed, the first explicit evidence of it is provided by the Apostolic Constitutions in the late fourth century. However, it appears from Cyprian's *Epistle to Fidus* that infants were baptised at Carthage at so early an age that ch. 25 of his treatise *On the Lapsed* can hardly be a description of a first communion, especially as it makes no reference to baptism. It follows that infants received communion at Carthage not just once but regularly, and if so the likelihood is that children received it also. It thus appears that infant and child communion arose at the same time and place, and if the former arose from a special interpretation of Jn. 6: 53, the probability is that the latter arose from the same source. The absence of earlier evidence cannot be explained away. That children were present at the services of the Church from the beginning of its history is very probable, but it is quite arbitrary to infer that they received communion. This would only have been the case if communion had been thought appropriate for them. On the other hand, there is evidence of adult communion in every period from the Last Supper onwards, and the communion of women is well attested, not merely the com-

munion of men. Why, then, is there no evidence of the communion of children until the middle of the third century, unless it was a later development?

The sacrament of baptism provides us with an instructive parallel. There is continuous evidence of adult baptism from the New Testament onwards (the baptism of women being well attested, not merely the baptism of men), and there is continuous evidence of infant baptism from the end of the first century. In all probability, children also were admitted to baptism from the end of the first century, since adults and infants both were, and there is direct evidence to prove the admission of children from Irenaeus onwards (*Against Heresies* 2:22:4). But if, from the time of the apostles, children not only were baptised but received communion, why is there complete silence on the point until the middle of the third century, and no explicit evidence until near the end of the fourth? It is no answer to say that there is silence also about a child catechuminate and about a ceremony of admission to communion at the age of discretion. To look for a formal catechuminate of children and a ceremony of admission to communion in this early period is very likely anachronistic: all that one could certainly expect to find is evidence of people receiving communion from the age when they customarily began to receive it. But, as we have said, there is evidence only of men and women receiving communion. There is no evidence of boys or girls doing so.

It must also be noted that, when child communion does finally appear, it appears in combination with infant communion. Now, what the advocates of child communion are contending for is that children should receive communion, *but not infants*. The practice of giving communion to children but not to infants, however, is of much later date than the practice of giving communion both to children and to infants. The former practice, in fact, can be traced back no further than the late thirteenth century.¹⁷ But, that being so, one cannot by any stretch of the imagination suppose it to be a continuation of the practice of apostolic times.

The third consideration bearing on the admission of children to communion is the requirement of baptism as a pre-requisite. Baptism, as we saw earlier, is indeed a pre-requisite for admission to communion; and baptism, as we further observed, is not complete without faith. Faith, moreover, involves repentance (Mk. 1: 15; Acts 20: 21; Heb. 6: 1), and repentance is a mature decision about changing the course of one's life—a decision of which children may in some cases be capable, but of which we should not expect them to be capable and may not be able to distinguish whether they are or not. A communicant is, in sacramental terms, a committed and practising Christian: he has been baptised, which means that he has also been instructed in the word, has repented and has confessed his faith; and he is now living a life of obedience to God. But a child has hardly reached this stage. He may

not yet be capable of a radical repentance, and the faith that he has is essentially immature and unstable: 'children', as St. Paul says, are 'tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine' (Eph. 4: 14). And though, in the context of a Christian family especially, there is every reason to hope that a child's incipient faith will survive the testing experience of growing up and that he will make a mature decision against sin and for Christ, yet there does not seem to be any adequate reason for anticipating the outcome and treating him in a way which is beyond his years. The age of maturity is not an age that can be fixed with rigidity, and the Bible does not attempt to fix it in this way; but one need not hesitate to say that it is an age which a young child has certainly not reached, and which an adolescent may well not have reached either.

Against this line of reasoning, appeal may be made by the advocates of child communion to the solidarity of the family unit. Granted that the faith of a child is not mature, it may be said, yet it is none the less real; and a child of Christian parents is united in a family relationship with those whose faith is both real and mature. This, however, though true, is not relevant. A communicant, as we have said, is in sacramental terms a committed and practising Christian: he has therefore dispensed with the need of drawing his qualifications as a Christian from others. But to appeal to the family relationship is to invoke others, and to do so here is to do it in a connection in which it is simply not appropriate.

These three considerations are consequently valid objections not only to infant communion but also to child communion. At the same time, however, they are valid arguments in favour of admission to communion at adulthood. It therefore seems that the deferment of admission to communion (as well as confirmation) until the candidate becomes an adult is the course which accords best with Christ's institution, and this being so, there is no reason to fear that children or infants will suffer any loss by not being admitted to communion earlier.

FOOTNOTES

¹ See, for example, Michael Perry (ed.), *Crisis for Confirmation* (London, SCM, 1967).

² See Keele '67: *the National Evangelical Anglican Congress Statement* (London, Falcon Books, 1967).

³ 'It is agreeable with the usage of the Church in times past: whereby it was ordained that Confirmation should be ministered to them that were of perfect age, that they being instructed in Christ's Religion, should openly profess their own faith, and promise to be obedient unto the will of God.' The phrase here 'in times past' does not mean in the immediate past, for the passage consists of one of the reasons given for raising the age of confirmation from what it has recently been. Patristic times are evidently meant, and the belief of Calvin about patristic practice (*Institutes* 4:19:4) is reflected.

⁴ See J. D. C. Fisher, *Christian Initiation: Baptism in the Mediaeval West* (London, SPCK, 1965), chs. 6, 8.

- ⁶ In this connection, the article by Michael Gwinnell 'The Age—or Stage—for Confirmation', printed in the *Clergy Review* for January 1970, is of interest. It shows a Roman Catholic who, under Anglican Evangelical influence, is coming to feel that the right way to re-integrate confirmation with baptism is to postpone the former until the late teens, when a stable commitment (such as marriage) first becomes practicable.
- ⁶ The terms 'good' and 'evil' in these passages must not be misinterpreted. It is not moral discernment that is in view, but the perception of the senses and the intellect, as the last two passages make particularly clear. Compare 2 Sam. 19: 35, where Barzillai describes himself as so old that he 'cannot discern between good and evil', i.e. he is able to perceive no more than an infant.
- ⁷ According to E. R. Thiele, Amaziah, Ahaz, Amon and Josiah were fifteen, sixteen, seventeen and sixteen respectively when their heirs were born (*The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, 2nd ed., Exeter, Paternoster Press, 1965, p. 206).
- ⁸ Eighteen was the age of marriage only for males. The age of marriage for females was thirteen (see Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, London, SCM, 1969, pp. 364f., 368).
- ⁹ *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (3rd ed., London, SCM, 1966).
- ¹⁰ It may have been more of a domestic occasion among the Jews of the dispersion, who could seldom visit Jerusalem. Thus Philo, whose home was Alexandria, says that at the passover there is no need of priests since the whole nation acts as priest and every house is a temple (*De Vita Mosis* 2:224f.; *De Decalogo* 159; *De Specialibus Legibus* 2:145f., 148).
- ¹¹ *The Hebrew Passover from the Earliest Times to AD 70* (London, OUP, 1963), pp. 254, 257f., etc. The only possible evidence from an earlier period for participation by minors is Ex. 12: 26f., and this need only mean that a son will sometimes ask his father why he is making the festival-pilgrimage.
- ¹² See J. D. C. Fisher, *op. cit.*, pp. 102-104, 106.
- ¹³ If the Mishnah's account of the passover meal is any guide to the character of the Last Supper, it was a substantial meal of more than one course, at which a minimum of four cups of wine were drunk or circulated, and unlimited drinking could take place between the first and third cups (Pesahim 10: 1-8).
- ¹⁴ Job 1: 13 and Zec. 9: 17 are not exceptions, since the young men and women who are there described as drinking wine are probably of marriageable age. Lam. 2: 11f. could be an exception, but this is quite uncertain, for there (as in a number of other contexts) the word 'wine' very likely means bunches of grapes.
- ¹⁵ See Joachim Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries* and *The Origins of Infant Baptism* (London, SCM, 1960 and 1963).
- ¹⁶ *op. cit.*, p. 140.
- ¹⁷ See J. D. C. Fisher, *op. cit.*, p. 105f.