

Communion in the Early Church 1 Cor 11:17-34

Introduce series and why

It's become increasingly apparent that we are excluding certain people in the life of the church and that even on Easter Day – why can't I?

So we discussed at Cluster council, at MLT and decided to move forward in exploring the issue as a congregation and take a vote. This is not a done deal, and we are having a general and open discussion which will lead to a congregation vote and then ultimately an MLT vote.

So how are we going to explore it:

Week 1: Communion in the Early Church 1 Cor 11:17-34

Week 2: Meals Jesus Had

Week 3: Justice Issues

Week 4: Children were important to Jesus (Parade)

How I'm going to structure –

Thought's questions

Talk

Responses?

So before we go any further, what are your questions, thoughts, reactions?

I want to put it out there from the outset, that I support the move, one of the most key things that kept me in the faith as a teenager was not being refused communion in the Methodist church that I attended. I think at that point I may have walked away if I had been refused. That led me to being confirmed at the point that I was exploring ordination, an important and significant moment in my faith, and not just so I can take communion. I have been involved in Churches going through this process, across the country. My own exploration as a writer/researcher on the early church practices also has led to the understanding of how children were involved in the early church and would not have been excluded. I also support it for a couple of other reasons, both slightly personal – the first is that I have seen my daughter grow in faith over the years and I know that she has a deep understanding of her love of and for Jesus, and I know that she wants to be part of the church life – from a very early age she has asked to take communion as she knows she's left out – don't think it's fair as adults get it and children don't. Also as a minister my heart breaks when the children look at me with pleading eyes wanting to be included and take the bread and wine – and it breaks my heart that something Jesus would have done we are not.

So let's look at communion in the early church and also a little bit of history.

The early church met in houses, and would gather around tables, there is nothing that shows that children would be excluded. Baptism was seen as the way into entering into the faith – we see it many times, the eunuch, the jailer, all baptized when they respond to Christ's call.

This pattern of stayed like that until about 1281 and the reformation– in this system, the idea of Augustine's original sin was key, so people were baptized at

an early age to secure the child's place in heaven. Most of the time this was bishops who did this but as the church grew, and there were less bishops available because there were more churches, priests would baptize and then the bishops would come and 'confirm' what the priest had done.

In 1281 at the Lambeth conference it was Archbishop Peckham who started our current understanding of confirmation being linked to communion and stated that those confirmed – without good reason – should not take communion. Cramner's Prayer book in 1549 during the reformation backed this up. And leaves us where we are now.

And we see that communion is linked with confirmation and sometimes that means that children/yp are confirmed a lot earlier than they want to be because they want to take communion. What I have found is that where children take communion from a young age they are less likely to drop away and when they are confirmed, they are doing it as an important step in their faith rather than just to be able to take communion.

Throughout the 20th Century the church of England has looked at this issue on and off, a narrow loss of a vote at synod in 1976, defeated the motion that Baptism was the only rite to receive communion and then subsequent reports and votes led to experimental dioceses in the mid 80's Southwark, Manchester & Peterborough to letting children into communion – a review of these showed it was positive and the CofE continued to develop and reform the practice to where we are today, that Churches can apply to their bishops to do this as we are.

The reading we had today, was of Paul telling the church in Corinth that when communion happens it should be taken seriously, that all should be able to receive and that it's not a meal to eat and get drunk from, but an act of reverence repeating what Jesus did and that we should be taking communion for the right reasons and not the wrong ones – it leads us to ask questions such as who was likely to be there, is he talking to adults only? Are children unworthy? Are children excluded? And I would say no to all – maybe we are, maybe we are unworthy because of who or what we do, but we have the deeper understanding of that.

Jackie Cray – wife of Bishop Graham Cray states of the early church;

The children were present with the adults at the main worship event
The children are welcomed, received and attended to as participants
The children are the responsibility of the whole extended family (OT) or church gathering (NT).¹

So as we start this exploration, I think we need to take note of the church history, what the early church was like and how communion was seen until pretty recently. Understand that it won't stop people being confirmed but it will bring people to an owned faith rather than doing something to get something!.

Questions?

¹ Jackie Cray, Seen and Heard, Monarch, 1995, as quoted in Montgomery, M, Young People and Worship: A Practical Guide, 2007 CHP.

