

# Age for Communion in Historic Presbyterian and Congregational Practice

## Historic Presbyterian Standards (Westminster Assembly)

The **Westminster Standards** (1640s) set a clear principle: only those with sufficient maturity in faith may partake of the Lord's Supper. The Westminster *Larger Catechism* explicitly states that baptism can be administered even to infants, **whereas the Lord's Supper is reserved "only to such as are of years and ability to examine themselves"** <sup>1</sup>. In other words, communicants must have reached an age of discretion with the capacity for self-examination in faith. The Westminster *Confession of Faith* likewise insists that **"all ignorant and ungodly persons, as they are unfit to enjoy communion with [Christ]... are unworthy of the Lord's table, and cannot, without great sin... partake of these holy mysteries, or be admitted thereunto"** <sup>2</sup>. This "ignorant and ungodly" clause means that children or anyone lacking a basic understanding of the gospel were barred from communion until they demonstrated appropriate knowledge and piety.

In practice, Presbyterian churches following Westminster would **fence the table** to ensure only qualified communicants partook. The **Westminster Directory for Public Worship** originally included detailed directions: *"None are to be admitted [to the Lord's Supper] but such as being baptized are found upon careful examination by the Minister, before the other Church-Officers, to have a competent measure of knowledge and ability to examine themselves... the ignorant and scandalous are not to be admitted."* <sup>3</sup>. Although Parliament abridged this wording, the principle remained: ministers and elders were to examine baptized youth or adults for a *credible profession of faith* and understanding of Christian doctrine before admitting them to the Lord's Supper <sup>3</sup>. Thus, there was no fixed "minimum age" numerically; rather, the **threshold was a credible profession of faith and spiritual discernment**, which typically occurred in one's youth or later.

The Westminster *Shorter Catechism* reinforces these requirements. It teaches that those who would worthily partake must **"examine themselves of their knowledge to discern the Lord's body, of their faith to feed upon Him, of their repentance, love, and new obedience"** (echoing 1 Cor. 11:28) – again implying a level of maturity and instruction consistent with at least adolescent understanding <sup>4</sup>. In summary, historic Presbyterian practice (Scotland, England, America) did **not** commune baptized children until they had come of age to understand the gospel, profess personal faith, and submit to church oversight. This usually meant **waiting until early teenage years or beyond** – essentially the **"age of discretion"** – at which point, after **catechetical training and an examination by the elders**, a youth could be admitted as a *communicant member*.

## Historic Congregational Standards (Cambridge and Savoy)

The conservative **Congregationalist** tradition in the 17th century held very similar standards, as seen in documents like the Cambridge Platform (1648, New England) and the Savoy Declaration (1658, England). Congregational polity emphasized a **regenerate church membership**, so only those who personally owned the faith could enjoy full membership and communion. The Cambridge Platform explicitly required that

individuals seeking full church membership undergo examination by the elders for evidence of repentance and faith in Christ, and then make a public confession of conversion before the congregation <sup>5</sup>. Even those who had been *baptized as infants* could not automatically take the Lord's Supper when they grew up; **such baptized children had to be examined and profess their faith before "they can exercise the privileges of full membership, such as participating in the Lord's Supper."** <sup>5</sup> In short, **birth into the covenant was not sufficient for communion** – personal faith had to be confirmed as one reached maturity. This led to the New England practice of "owning the covenant" in one's youth or adulthood to become a communicant. (Indeed, the *Half-Way Covenant* of 1662 arose as a compromise for those who had been baptized but not yet made a public profession; under that scheme they could have their own children baptized, but they still were *not* admitted to the Lord's Table without a conversion testimony.)

The **Savoy Declaration** (the Congregationalists' confession, largely based on Westminster) affirmed the same fence around the Table. It repeats that **"All ignorant and ungodly persons, as they are unfit to enjoy communion with Christ... are unworthy of the Lord's Table, and cannot, without great sin against Him, while they remain such, partake of these holy mysteries, or be admitted thereunto."** <sup>6</sup> . Thus, in both English and American Congregational churches, **young people were only admitted to communion after coming to an age of understanding and making a credible profession of faith.** Typically, Congregational churches required a **rigorous catechism training and a relation of one's conversion** before the congregation. For example, teenagers in New England would study the Westminster Shorter Catechism (also adopted by Congregationalists) and, upon sensing true faith in Christ, they would come before the church to "own the covenant" – essentially their **confirmation of faith** – and thus be received as communicant members. Those who could not or did not make such a profession were withheld from the Table. (This strictness was a hallmark of conservative Congregationalism; in contrast, it was noted even in the 1600s that more lenient Presbyterian churches **"allowed all 'non-scandalous' persons to receive the Lord's Supper"**, whereas Congregationalists insisted on a manifest conversion for membership <sup>7</sup> .)

## Requirements for Communicant Admission

Both Presbyterian and Congregational traditions shared common **requirements for admission to the Lord's Supper**. These can be summarized as follows:

- **Baptism:** Only baptized individuals could become communicants. In these paedobaptist churches, this usually meant the person had been baptized in infancy. But baptism alone did not confer the right to communion – it brought one into the visible church as a **non-communicating member** under care until such time as they professed faith <sup>8</sup> . Baptized covenant children were considered members of the church, yet **they could not partake of the Supper until they "embrace Christ" personally** and are received as communicants <sup>8</sup> .
- **Catechetical Instruction:** There was an expectation of **religious instruction in childhood**, often via catechisms. For example, the Westminster Shorter Catechism was designed to teach children the "principles of religion." Church elders or parents would ensure the youth **knew the core doctrines of the fall, redemption in Christ, faith and repentance, the meaning of the sacraments, etc**, before coming to the Table <sup>9</sup> <sup>10</sup> . The Westminster Directory urged ministers to **catechize the youth and privately instruct the ignorant**, so that when they reached years of discretion they

would possess a “competent measure of knowledge” for self-examination <sup>3</sup>. In short, **intellectual and doctrinal preparedness** was seen as essential.

- **Profession of Faith (Confirmation):** When a baptized young person was deemed to have sufficient understanding and exhibited a sincere faith, they would be guided to make a **public profession of faith** before the church. In Presbyterian polity, this usually involved **interview/examination by the Session (elders)** followed by the youth answering membership/confirmation questions in front of the congregation. In Congregational polity, the person often gave a **personal account of conversion** (sometimes called a “relation”) to the congregation <sup>5</sup>. This step served as the “**confirmation**” of the individual’s baptismal vows (though unlike Anglican or Catholic practice, it was not a separate sacrament nor tied to a bishop, but rather a *local church admission rite*). Only after this profession was the person admitted to communion. The **age for this rite was not rigidly fixed** by rule, but in practice it coincided with adolescence or early adulthood once genuine faith could be articulated.
- **Age of Discretion:** The historic language of these traditions often speaks of “*years of understanding*” or “*age of discretion.*” While no exact age (e.g. 12 or 16) was mandated across the board, **the consensus was that a child must reach an age where they can understand gospel truth, examine themselves, and take vows earnestly.** Often, this was around the teen years. As one analysis of Reformed practice puts it, “**the best age for such admission may well be the age of discretion, which is likely to be some time during the teenage years,**” at which point the church “*may well ask for some verbal and public declaration of personal faith.*” <sup>4</sup>. In many churches, **mid-teenage (around 13–16)** became a customary range for communicant admission – after a period of catechism class or “communicants’ class.” However, individuals were only admitted when the **elders were satisfied of their faith and understanding**, even if that meant waiting longer in some cases. (Notably, a number of Puritan youths in New England did not become full communicants until well into adulthood if they felt unsure of their conversion – prompting later generational tensions like the Half-Way Covenant.)
- **Examination and Oversight by Elders:** Both traditions placed the responsibility on church officers to **guard the Table**. Admission was **not automatic by age**; one had to be deemed ready. The Westminster Assembly’s guidelines (adopted in Scotland and by conservative Presbyterians) charged ministers and elders to examine each candidate’s knowledge and conduct <sup>3</sup>. Likewise, the Congregational Cambridge Platform had the local elders test the candidate’s understanding and godliness prior to admission <sup>5</sup>. This ensures the **communicant member is a credible professor of Christ**. Scandalous conduct or insufficient knowledge were grounds to delay or refuse communion – a practice often called “fencing the table.” The **Lord’s Supper was a covenant meal for the committed faithful**, not an evangelistic device or a mere familial rite. Thus children had to “**grow up**” into full privileges under guidance of the church.

In summary, **confirmation in these conservative Reformed contexts was essentially the process of a baptized child becoming a communing member** – achieved by catechesis, profession of faith, and examination, rather than by reaching a certain birthday. Until that point, baptized youngsters were considered “**non-communicant members**” who could attend worship but **not partake of the elements**.

## Modern Conservative Practice (Example: PCA Book of Church Order)

Contemporary conservative Presbyterian and Congregational bodies have retained these historic principles, though the exact procedures may vary. For instance, the **Presbyterian Church in America (PCA)** – a conservative Presbyterian denomination in the USA – explicitly distinguishes between **non-communing members (baptized children)** and **communing members**. According to the PCA Book of Church Order, *“The children of believers are... non-communing members of the church... entitled to baptism and pastoral oversight... with a view to their embracing Christ”,* while *“Communing members are those who have made a profession of faith in Christ, have been baptized, and have been admitted by the Session to the Lord’s Table.”* <sup>8</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Only those who **credible profess faith and are approved by the Session (the elders)** may partake of communion. The PCA has no fixed age requirement; some children make their profession as early as 10 or 11, while others do so in the typical “communicants’ class” around ages 12–13 or older – **the key is not age per se but a credible understanding and faith**. The **pastor and elders interview each child** to ensure they grasp the gospel, can explain the meaning of the Lord’s Supper, and exhibit a sincere commitment to Christ before they are admitted to the Table (BCO 57-5 outlines this examination process). This policy reflects the direct continuity with the Westminster Standards’ teaching that **self-examination and discernment are prerequisites** (cf. 1 Cor. 11:28). Notably, the PCA (along with the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and other conservative Reformed bodies) has officially **rejected paedocommunion** (the administering of the Supper to very young children or infants) as inconsistent with historic doctrine <sup>12</sup> <sup>4</sup> . They affirm the Westminster Larger Catechism’s stance that the sacrament is for those *able* to remember Christ’s death and examine themselves – effectively ruling out participants too young to exercise faith and repentance consciously <sup>1</sup> .

Conservative **Congregational** churches today (such as those in the Congregational Federation or the CCCC) likewise typically maintain that baptized children must undergo **confirmation instruction and profess faith** before communing. While terminology differs (some may use “confirmation class” language), the practice is rooted in the same historic ideals: **the Lord’s Supper is for professing believers only\*\***, thus a youth must reach an age where they can declare their own faith in Christ and understand the solemn nature of the sacrament.

In conclusion, **both the Presbyterian and Congregational traditions in the USA and UK have historically required that individuals come to an age of responsible faith before being admitted to the Lord’s Supper**. Their foundational documents – from the Westminster Directory and Catechisms to the Cambridge and Savoy Platforms – all emphasize **knowledge, catechesis, repentance, and personal profession of faith** as prerequisites for Communion. This generally meant that **children waited until their early teens or later** to become communicant members. Through *confirmation* (in the sense of confirming baptismal vows personally) and **examination by church leaders**, the churches sought to ensure that only **true believers of sufficient maturity** communed, in obedience to Scripture. This conservative practice has remained largely unchanged in those branches that continue to honor the great Reformed confessions and church orders <sup>1</sup> <sup>11</sup> , safeguarding the Lord’s Table as a covenant meal for those who can “discern the Lord’s body” in faith.

### Sources:

- Westminster Larger Catechism Q.177 (1647) <sup>1</sup> ; Westminster Confession of Faith ch.29.8 <sup>2</sup> – requirements that communicants be of understanding faith (“of years and ability to examine themselves”) and exclusion of the ignorant from the Lord’s Table.

- *Original Westminster Directory for Public Worship* (1645), as cited by John Allin (1648) <sup>3</sup> – stipulating that only baptized persons of competent knowledge and approved conduct, examined by the minister and elders, are admitted to communion.
- **Cambridge Platform** of New England (1648) <sup>5</sup> – church membership chapters requiring that baptized children profess personal faith and be examined before enjoying full membership and the Lord's Supper.
- **Savoy Declaration** (1658) <sup>6</sup> – reiterating Westminster's stance that "ignorant and ungodly" persons (i.e. those without a credible profession) may not partake of the sacrament.
- Roger Beckwith, "*Age of Admission to the Lord's Supper*," *WTJ* 38:2 (1976) <sup>4</sup> – analysis of historic Reformed practice, noting the "age of discretion" typically in the teen years for communicant admission, following a public declaration of faith.
- Presbyterian Church in America, **Book of Church Order** (current) <sup>11</sup> <sup>8</sup> – defines non-communing vs. communing members, requiring profession of faith and Session approval for admittance to the Lord's Table (illustrating modern adherence to historic principles).

<sup>1</sup> [freepresbyterian.org](http://www.freepresbyterian.org)

[http://www.freepresbyterian.org/uploads/Larger\\_Catechism.pdf](http://www.freepresbyterian.org/uploads/Larger_Catechism.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> **Of the Lord's Supper - Westminster Confession of 1646 - Study Resources**

[https://www.blueletterbible.org/study/ccc/westminster/Of\\_The\\_Lords\\_Supper.cfm](https://www.blueletterbible.org/study/ccc/westminster/Of_The_Lords_Supper.cfm)

<sup>3</sup> <sup>9</sup> <sup>10</sup> **Westminster Assembly on the Conditions for Partaking of the Lord's Supper – Purely Presbyterian**

<https://purelypresbyterian.com/2016/06/23/westminster-assembly-conditions-for-partaking-of-the-lords-supper/>

<sup>4</sup> <sup>12</sup> **Age of admission to the Lord's Supper – Walking With Giants**

<https://www.walkingwithgiants.net/marriage-family-society/children/age-of-admission-to-the-lords-supper/>

<sup>5</sup> <sup>7</sup> **Cambridge Platform - Wikipedia**

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cambridge\\_Platform](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cambridge_Platform)

<sup>6</sup> A declaration of the faith and order owned and practised in the Congregational Churches in England; agreed upon and consented unto by their elders and messengers in their meeting at the Savoy, Octob. 12. 1658. | [Early English Books Online](https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A89790.0001.001/1:3.30?rgn=div2&view=fulltext) | University of Michigan Library Digital Collections

<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A89790.0001.001/1:3.30?rgn=div2&view=fulltext>

<sup>8</sup> <sup>11</sup> **pcaac.org**

<https://www.pcaac.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/BCO-2021-for-with-bookmarks-for-website.pdf>