



“Monkey Business”? On the History of Confirmation

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We begin with Martin Luther’s infamous admonition: “In particular, avoid that *monkey business*, Confirmation, which is really a fanciful deception.”¹ For the present-day church leader attempting to disrupt the status quo regarding ministry with adolescents, Luther’s jarring words provide a handy attention-grabber. Indeed, I confess that I have used Luther’s “monkey business” remark for exactly such a purpose. Twice. Each time, I was a newly installed associate pastor in charge of youth ministries, and each time my job description included the directive to take the existing “Confirmation program” and make it more effective (read: more successful). Each time, after building some consensus among key leaders, I invited families with “Confirmation-aged” youth to a meeting to hear about the new and improved confirmation program. Each time, I shared Luther’s line about Confirmation-as-monkey-business. (The second time, Luther’s line was

¹Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, 55 vols. (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1958–86), 45:24 (volumes hereafter cited *LW*). “Monkey business” (for *affen spiel* in the original German) is insult enough. But the real insult is the term that gets translated as “fanciful deception.” Luther used the term *lügen thand*. This composite pairs the German word for “a lie” (*Lügen*) with the German word for a cheap gewgaw or trumpery (*Tand*). See Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke*, 127 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–2009), 10/2:282 (volumes hereafter cited as *WA*).

Confirmation has a long and complicated history, from a time of instruction in the early church to a sacrament in the medieval church, to Christian education for youth in the modern church. There are many historical models to draw on for the future of Confirmation.

featured on a PowerPoint slide next to a picture of a bunch of caged monkeys.) I had no shame. I thought I knew more than everyone else about how to make confirmation "successful." As it turned out, I had much to learn. Herewith is some of what I have learned about Confirmation and its history.²

LUTHER'S OBJECTION

As indicated above, Luther's negative assessment of Confirmation provides a provocative jumping-off point for a survey of the history of Confirmation. Indeed, the context of his crack about "monkey business" (*affen spiel*, in the original German edition) bears some elaboration. The kind of Confirmation that Luther had in mind when he lambasted it was the sacramental understanding of episcopal (bishops') Confirmation instituted and practiced in the Middle Ages. Luther initially attacked the notion of Confirmation as a sacrament in his highly polemical *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*,³ observing, "It is amazing that it should have entered the minds of these men [i.e., the popes] to make a sacrament of confirmation out of the laying on of hands." Luther continued, sarcastically remarking that just because Jesus and the apostles did it (the laying on of hands for blessing and for healing) does not make it a sacrament; otherwise, preaching and prayer ought to be considered sacraments also. "It is sufficient," Luther concluded, "to regard confirmation as a certain churchly rite" similar to other ceremonies such as the blessing of water or oil and the like.⁴

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Nearly two years later, in the summer of 1522, Luther received a report from a pastor in Zwickau, Germany, that a bishop would soon be arriving in that town. The purpose of the bishop's visit was, in part, to offer the sacrament of Confirmation to all children who had been baptized since the previous bishop's visit. The bishop's announcement included various claims about the gifts bestowed by sacramental Confirmation, so Luther, in a written reply, advised Zwickau's evangelical pastor to challenge the bishop to defend his claims about Confirmation based on scripture. If the bishop was unable to offer such a defense, then Zwickau's citizens were to be "warned not to put faith in the stage acts [*ludicra*] of such

²In this essay, the noun *Confirmation* will normally be rendered with a capital C in order to make clear that the word is referring to an ecclesiastical practice. Such ecclesial practice includes both the period of instruction that is often called *Confirmation* and the ceremony of blessing and sending—the rite of Confirmation or Affirmation—that often concludes the period of instruction.

³LW 36:11–126.

⁴LW 36:91–92.

confirmation.”⁵ Part of Luther’s reply found its way to the printing press. Luther’s “stage acts” comment did not appear in the publication, however, the publication did include these words: “Especially to be rejected is confirmation, that deceitful mumbo-jumbo [*Gaukelwerk*] of the episcopal idols.”⁶

Dismissive descriptors such as “stage acts” and “mumbo-jumbo”—not to mention “monkey business”—make it clear that Luther perceived the mode of Confirmation prevalent in his day to be superficial and lacking in biblical support. Yet, Luther placed great emphasis on instructing all believers in the basics of Christian faith and life. In Luther’s view, the best way to learn the basics was via frequent and ongoing study of the catechism.⁷ And Luther pushed for preachers to preach on the catechism at regular intervals.⁸

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For Luther and his earliest adherents it might be said: catechism—yes, Confirmation—no. Yet, Luther did not prohibit Confirmation altogether. Following his statement about “monkey business,” Luther offered a sort of grudging, ironic consent for Confirmation, as long as believers understood that “God knows nothing about it” and that “what the bishops claim about it is untrue.”⁹ Paying attention to the letter if not the spirit of these words, it can be observed that although Luther took a strong position against Confirmation as a sacrament, he did not entirely eliminate the possibility that the rite of Confirmation might (one day) have some usefulness as a ceremonial tradition.

⁵WA 2:584. My translation.

⁶LW 45:8. The words came at the end of a short, sarcastic publication titled *The Persons Related by Consanguinity and Affinity Who Are Forbidden to Marry according to the Scripture, Leviticus 18* (LW 45:7–8). The connection of Confirmation to marriage can be explained by the fact that *another* reason for the bishop’s visit to Zwickau purportedly involved making sure the Sacrament of Marriage was also being properly administered.

⁷“Let all Christians drill themselves in the catechism daily, and consistently put it into practice. . . . Let them constantly read and teach, learn and meditate and ponder. Let them never stop until they have proved by experience and are certain that they have taught the devil to death and have become more learned than God himself and all his saints.” Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, trans. Charles Arand et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 382–383 (hereafter cited as *The Large Catechism*).

⁸“The reason we take such care to preach on the catechism frequently,” Luther explained, “is to impress it upon our young people, not in a lofty and learned manner but briefly and very simply, so that it may penetrate deeply into their minds and remain fixed in their memories.” *The Large Catechism*, 386. A footnote on page 386 states that Wittenberg’s 1533 Church Ordinance required that preaching on the catechism was to take place four times per year.

⁹“I would permit confirmation as long as it is understood that God knows nothing of it, and has said nothing about it, and that what the bishops claim for it is untrue.” LW 45:24.

Whatever the case, given Luther's low opinion of Confirmation in general, and given his contention that catechetical study ought to be a daily and lifelong endeavor, it might be surprising that many of today's "Protestant" churches—including Lutheran churches—feature Confirmation with a capital C: a limited period of instruction mainly tailored for adolescents, capped off with a rite of blessing and sending.¹⁰ It seems natural, therefore, to ask, How did we get here?

INSTRUCTION AND INITIATION

The story of Confirmation is a story filled with twists and turns. The history of the ecclesial practice that came to be called Confirmation is, in a word, complex. The primary reason for this complexity is that the history comprises two separate but connected developments: (1) the development of Christian catechesis—the instruction of disciples in the basics of the faith—and (2) the development of the rite (or rites) surrounding Christian initiation. Adding to the complexity is the great variance throughout history in the way both catechesis and "confirmation" relate to the baptismal event and its promises. In the paragraphs that follow, I will focus on the development of the rite, tracing the history from the early church practice of anointing the newly baptized with oil (chrismation) to the early medieval practice that came to be called Confirmation. Where needed, I will also describe the place of instruction and catechization as it relates to the history of Confirmation.

To begin, we note that there is no rite of Confirmation in the New Testament—at least, no confirmation-like rite that is separate from the baptismal rite. However, a case can be made that there is biblical precedent for Confirmation—if we understand that the term "Confirmation" in some way incorporates a period of instruction preceding or following a rite of blessing, anointing, and/or sending. Examples include Jesus, after his own baptism by John, being "confirmed" as the beloved Son, bestowed with the Holy Spirit, and sent forth to endure forty days of testing in the wilderness; Jesus instructing his disciples (Greek: *matheitai* = "students") before sending them forth with a mission and the promise of the Holy Spirit; and in Acts, newcomers to the Christian community "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching" and received the Holy Spirit—although not necessarily in that order. When one combines the start of Jesus's own ministry with certain elements of the experiences of the original disciples, along with certain features of the initiation and instruction experienced by members of the first New Testament communities, it is possible to discern a scriptural precursor for what today might be termed Confirmation. Or, if not a precursor, then at least a loose pattern.

However, it is in the post-New Testament, early church period where Confirmation "proper" begins to take shape. While there is nothing called "Confirmation" in the writings of the early church, it is here that we find the origins of Confirmation. One origin involves the practice of instructing or catechizing adults *before* baptism. According to Justin Martyr's *Apology* (written about 150

¹⁰See note 2, above.

CE), baptism typically followed a period of instruction (i.e., catechesis).¹¹ And *The Didache* (dating perhaps to the late first century) demonstrates that candidates were baptized after they were taught and could recite the core precepts of the Way of Life, the Way of Jesus.¹² A baptismal candidate came to be called a *catechumen*—one who was being catechized and the collection of catechumens came to be called the *catechumenate*.

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The matter of catechizing candidates prior to baptism is problematized somewhat by Irenaeus’s second-century clarification that the children of new believers are also to be baptized—even, presumably, children too young to catechize prior to baptism. This raises questions about the instruction of baptized children and the incorporation of baptized youth or young adults in a catechumenate in the early centuries of the Christian movement. The historical record offers no definitive, comprehensive response or indication of some kind of rite at the end of a baptized child’s instruction. The only thing that can be assumed with some certainty is that baptized children (and unbaptized children) would absorb some basic Christian instruction from their parents, from the preacher’s sermons, and from their ongoing participation in the community of believers. Still, we are left with the original question: whence Confirmation?

CATECHIZATION AND CHRISMATION

It appears that the various rites of Confirmation found in today’s churches have their roots in what happened immediately after the water bath in ancient forms of the baptismal rite. In early Christian communities, baptisms were “sealed” with practices centered upon the bestowal of the Holy Spirit. Such sealing could take the form of blowing into the face of the baptized—a blowing away of evil spirits—followed by a prayer for the Holy Spirit to enter in. Accompanying this “exchange of spirits,” was the laying on of hands, and the anointing with oil—known as the *chrismation*—and the making of the sign of the cross (a.k.a. the *consignation*).¹³

¹¹Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, chapter LXI. Early Christian Writings, <https://tinyurl.com/yaure39a>.

¹²Representing perhaps the earliest Christian catechism, *The Didache*’s first four chapters delineate precepts for the Way of Life. The Way of Death is explained in chapter 5, followed by chapter 6’s admonition to do your best to keep to the Way of Life. Chapter 7, on baptism, states that after the candidate has “first recited all these precepts, baptize [the candidate] in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” *The Didache*, trans. Charles H. Hoole, Early Christian Writings, <https://tinyurl.com/yc9d8wm7>.

¹³This anointing or sealing with oil has been recovered in some of the baptismal practices of present-day “Protestant” churches; see, for instance, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *The Use of the Means of*

One major source for understanding the origins of Confirmation is *The Apostolic Tradition*, a third-century writing traditionally attributed to Hippolytus of Rome.¹⁴ The *Tradition* describes the laws and liturgies of an unnamed Christian community. Separated into three sections, part one describes the rules and prayers for ordaining bishops, elders, and deacons. Part two describes the gathering of the catechumenate for instruction and preparation for baptism, a period of instruction at three years.¹⁵ And part three describes expectations for the members of the community, how they were to conduct themselves and “advance in piety.” The *Tradition* makes clear that the catechumens were to take part in all dimensions of the community’s life except the Lord’s Supper. Participation in the Supper would be granted only after baptism.

In part 2, the features of the baptismal rite are described in detail. The service of initiation for the catechumens had three movements: (1) the bath, (2) the chrismation, and (3) the Lord’s Supper. It is the separation of the chrismation from the bath that appears to account for the subsequent ideas and practices that came to be called Confirmation. For the early centuries, however, Christian initiation appears to have consisted of a singular event in three acts.

The relevant section of the *Apostolic Tradition* outlines the rites surrounding Christian initiation as follows: The bishop prepares and consecrates two vessels of oil—one for exorcism and the other for thanksgiving. At the appointed time, the baptismal candidates are brought forward. Infants and children who cannot answer for themselves are permitted to have a parent answer for them. The candidates are asked to renounce Satan, upon which they are anointed with the exorcism oil. The bishop then releases the candidates to the elders, who lead the candidates to the water. Men are separated from women. Naked, the candidates are led to the water which, ideally, is a spring or flowing stream. Three times the candidate goes under the water, first while announcing belief in the Father, then the Son, then the Holy Spirit. The elders then anoint their candidates with the thanksgiving oil. The participants dress and return to the bishop, who lays hands on each one accompanied by a prayer for the Holy Spirit. The bishop then pours oil into his hands and lays his hands on the heads of each of the baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. “Then, after sealing each of them on the forehead” (presumably with the sign of the cross), the bishop gives each one the kiss of peace. Once the washings and anointments are complete, the neophytes are formally dismissed

Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 33 (principle 28), <https://tinyurl.com/y7lnvfcq>.

¹⁴Hippolytus, *On the Apostolic Tradition*, ed. and trans. Alistair Stewart, 2nd ed. (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2015). When did the *Apostolic Tradition* first appear? Was it really written by Hippolytus of Rome? Or does it more accurately reflect the practices of the church in Alexandria? How widely was the document disseminated and implemented in the third and fourth centuries? Although consensus on the answers to these questions is lacking, the introduction to this most recent edition of *Apostolic Tradition* offers a solid overview of the history and historiography of this document.

¹⁵*Apostolic Tradition*, 17. It is not clear if or how widely a three-year period for prebaptismal instruction was enforced. For instance, when Augustine finally joined the catechumenate under Ambrose, the time of intense instruction and baptismal preparation spanned only the season of Lent.

in order that they may immediately participate in Lord's Supper—a supper that includes not only bread and wine but also water, milk, and honey.¹⁶

FROM CHRISMATION TO CONFIRMATION

The *Apostolic Tradition* clearly differentiates the roles of bishops and elders. The task of sealing in the Holy Spirit belonged to the bishop. It is not clear exactly when this task became the fixed and exclusive domain of the bishops, but by the late fourth and early fifth centuries—the period of Ambrose and Augustine—only bishops could perform the anointing and sealing of the Holy Spirit. Pope Innocent I, in a letter dated March 19, 416 CE, stated that sealing of the newly baptized was not to be done by anyone other than the bishop, staking this claim on a certain reading of Acts 8. In circumstances where the elder (presbyter) administered the oil in the bishop's presence, they were nevertheless “not to sign the forehead with the same oil, which is reserved to bishops alone when they deliver the Spirit, the Paraclete.”¹⁷

Scholars who have written on the subject point to these fifth-century developments as the beginning of the theological and temporal breach between baptism and confirmation.

It is around this time that the term confirmation (or *confirmatio*)—rather than chrismation—was first employed. At some point in the middle of the fifth century, a French bishop named Faustus explained how baptism conveyed rebirth while the bishops' confirmation conveyed the spirit.¹⁸ Faustus claimed that “In baptism we are born anew for life, after baptism we are confirmed for battle . . . in baptism we are washed, after baptism we are strengthened.”¹⁹ Bishop Faustus's words might have been easily forgotten; however, they were later falsely attributed to a fourth-century pope and the language of being “confirmed” was lent greater weight in subsequent canonical rulings regarding Confirmation.²⁰

Scholars who have written on the subject point to these fifth-century developments as the beginning of the theological and temporal breach between baptism and confirmation. Concerning the outcome of the developments of this era, Nathan Mitchell observed that “the heavy symbolism of Christian initiation had,

¹⁶*Apostolic Tradition*, 21.

¹⁷Quoted in Paul Bradshaw, *Early Christian Worship: A Basic Introduction to Ideas and Practice*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2010), 38.

¹⁸“What the imposition of the hand bestows on each individual at the confirmation of neophytes is what the spirit bestowed upon all when he descended on the throng of believers [in Acts 2].” Quoted in Robert Cabié, “Christian Initiation,” in *The Church at Prayer: An Introduction to the Liturgy*, vol. 3, *The Sacraments*, ed. Aimé Georges Martimort, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1988), 57.

¹⁹Quoted in Gabriele Winkler, “Confirmation or Chrismation? A Study in Comparative Liturgy,” *Worship* 58 (1984): 14.

²⁰The legacy of Faustus's sermon has been much discussed. See Winkler, “Confirmation or Chrismation,” 13–17; Aidan Kavanagh, *Confirmation: Origins and Reform* (New York: Pueblo, 1988), 66–70; and J. D. C. Fisher, *Christian Initiation: Confirmation Then and Now* (London: SPCK, 1978), 132–136.

under the influence of declining catechesis and theological misunderstanding, forced the original architecture of the [baptismal] rite to collapse into two 'separate and distinct sacraments' with 'separate and distinct effects.'²¹ Aidan Kavanagh followed up on Mitchell's observation with an observation of his own:

Allowing confirmation to continue to wander apart from baptism and eucharist as its native frame of reference disrupts the entire initiatory norm and distracts pastoral effort by seeming to suggest that initiation is consummated not by eucharist but by episcopal confirmation and its gift of the Spirit, unaccountably delayed and separated from baptism by years and conditioned on attaining some level of formal religious education. This inevitably magnifies confirmation at the expense of baptism in popular perception. . . . The liturgical, sacramental, and theological inconveniences of such perception come at a high price.²²

With Kavanagh's rebuke in mind, it is worth noting that in the Eastern churches, the initiatory rite's pattern of baptism-chrismation/confirmation, followed immediately by the Eucharist, remained and continues to remain intact—including for the baptism of infants.²³

BAD ROADS AND BISHOPS ON HORSEBACK

From the fifth century forward, the development of Confirmation through the Reformation period can be described from the vantage point of two expansions: the expansion of Christian topography and the expansion of Christian bureaucracy. It is generally true that the early medieval church viewed baptism in water as a complete rebirth, while chrismation (confirmation) was seen as a necessary "added value" that only bishops could provide. Confirmation in the hands of a bishop came to be seen as that which equipped, strengthened, and emboldened those embarking on the new life in Christ. However, at the same time that this newer understanding of episcopal confirmation was developing, Latin Christendom was expanding in all directions, but especially northward.²⁴

²¹Nathan D. Mitchell, "Dissolution of the Rite of Christian Initiation," in *Made, Not Born* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1976), 71–72.

²²Kavanagh, *Confirmation*, 100 (and 71 for the citation of Mitchell). Aidan Kavanagh wrote a thorough investigation of the early evolution of Confirmation from the Roman Catholic perspective.

²³For a description of the Orthodox Church's understanding and practice of baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist as a unitary rite of initiation, and why the differences hinder Orthodox recognition of the full ministries of the Roman Catholic Church and the churches of the Reformation, see Merja Merras, "Baptismal Recognition and the Orthodox Churches," in *Baptism and the Unity of the Church*, ed. Michael Root and Risto Saarinen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 138–149.

²⁴For a thorough overview of the development of Christendom in the Middle Ages, see Joseph H. Lynch and Phillip C. Adamo, *The Medieval Church: A Brief History*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2014). Regarding the spread of Christendom in the fourth through eighth centuries, read chapter 4, "The Conversion of the West, 350–700."

In the 600s and 700s, Christianity began to dominate in lands where only Christian outposts had existed before, namely, in Britania, Frisia, northern Francia, and Germania. As it expanded, bishoprics grew from fairly manageable districts to spans of territory that became increasingly difficult to administer.²⁵ As Christianity was introduced and Christendom instituted, Rome tried to keep up, dividing the newly Christianized territories into more manageable administrative zones (diocese), each with their own bishop. During this time, baptisms increased but churches in the more difficult-to-reach areas might have waited a generation for a visit from a bishop. The Christian education scholar Luther Lindberg summarizes this development: “By the Middle Ages the gap between birth and baptism had narrowed to a few days while the time between baptism and confirmation was extended to several years.”²⁶

The resulting “backlog” of baptized infants and children awaiting episcopal confirmation led to some surprising scenarios. Lindberg notes, “bishops often did their confirming while they were on their horses riding past confirmands who were lined up along the edge of a road (an outsider could sneak into the row and be confirmed). The ‘good’ bishop was the bishop who would actually get off his horse and lay both hands on each confirmand.” In England, the Synod of Exeter (1287 CE) declared that “any passing bishop” could be approached for confirmation. To this end, Robert Jenson observed that “confirmation is the result of episcopal arrogance and bad medieval roads.”²⁷ These few anecdotes give an idea of some of the situations created by the “demand” for Confirmation during the medieval period. However, it is important to remember we are discussing a period of nearly one thousand years. It is difficult to say the extent of the problem throughout Latin Christendom.

The same consideration should be given to the state of catechesis during this period. During the early church period, while the adult catechumenate was still relatively large, instruction in the basics of the Christian faith and life was a vital element and activity for Christian bishops and elders. However, thanks to Augustine’s appeal for universal infant baptism, and Emperor Justinian I making baptism compulsory for nearly everyone in his empire, almost all Christian newcomers were newborns. Consequently, by the start of the 600s, formal catechetical instruction waned in importance and effect.

²⁵For example, one of the better-travelled bishops of the eighth century was Boniface, the missionary bishop to Germania or, as he is sometimes called, the “Apostle of Germany.” Boniface introduced and instituted Christendom from Salzburg to Mainz to Utrecht, but Rome found it hard to keep up. The best source for understanding and appreciating the extraordinary life of Boniface—including his extraordinary administrative skills—is his own correspondence. See Boniface, *The Letters of Saint Boniface*, trans. Ephraim Emerton (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

²⁶Luther Lindberg, “Lutheran Confirmation Ministry in Historical Perspective,” in *Confirmation: Engaging Lutheran Foundations and Practices* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 49.

²⁷Lindberg, “Lutheran Confirmation Ministry,” 50. Elsewhere, Jenson claimed that the transformation of “Baptism’s special rite of the Spirit” into “detached ‘confirmation’” could be blamed upon the medieval confluence of “large dioceses, bad roads, and high infant mortality.” Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, *The Works of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 261.

On the other hand, Christian Europe was becoming a culture saturated in, well, things Christian. The baptized (that is, almost everybody) absorbed the faith as much as they learned it. The absorption of the faith was organized around a church calendar that featured feast days organized around the major events of Christ's life and the lives of exemplary saints. Such holidays and observances were attended by processions, parades, and plays. The liturgy of the mass was available daily and emphasized on Sundays, as were Bible readings and sermons. Christians were taught to confess their sin to a priest and there were manuals that priests would use to teach about sin and to absolve it. There were works of art and popular publications that taught the faith: for example, Dante's descriptions of hell, purgatory, and heaven (*Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*), and a surprisingly popular book called the *Ars moriendi*—"Art of Dying." In addition, there were times of renewed efforts to catechize young and old alike.²⁸ Thanks to the recently invented printing press, Coelde's catechism was an early bestseller in Germany and the Netherlands—about sixty years before Luther published his *Small Catechism*. Therefore, it would be inaccurate to say that Luther reintroduced catechetical instruction.²⁹ Nevertheless, at the dawning of the 1500s, catechization and Confirmation were two entirely separate entities.

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As Confirmation developed out of and away from the early church's baptismal rite, its status as a separate sacrament was not immediately clarified. In fact, it was almost one thousand years after Faustus's sermon that a church council finally got around to establishing that Confirmation was, in fact, a separate sacrament—one of seven. According to the decree of the Council of Florence (1439), "by baptism we are reborn spiritually; by confirmation we grow in grace and are strengthened in faith." A century later, at the Council of Trent, it was declared that anyone who insisted that Confirmation was *not* a sacrament and that it did not have to be performed by a bishop was considered *anathema*. The current Roman Catholic Catechism states that "Baptism, the Eucharist, and the sacrament of Confirmation together constitute the 'sacraments of Christian initiation,' whose unity must be

²⁸For example, around 1470, Dietrich Coelde published *A Small Handbook for Christians*. See Dietrich Coelde, "A Fruitful Mirror or Small Handbook for Christians," in *Three Reformation Catechisms, Catholic, Anabaptist, and Lutheran*, ed. Denis Janz, trans. Robert Dewell (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1982), 29–130.

²⁹This paragraph represents a reworking of a paragraph in Hans Wiersma, "The Story of the Small Catechism," in *By Heart: Conversations with Martin Luther's Small Catechism* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2017), 17–40. For a breezy overview of the history of Christian instruction, see this chapter. For an excellent overview of each of the parts of Luther's Small Catechism, see the rest of the book.

safeguarded. It must be explained to the faithful that the reception of the sacrament of Confirmation is necessary for the completion of baptismal grace.”³⁰

FROM MARTIN’S REJECTION TO THE OTHER MARTIN’S RENEWAL

It may now be clearer why Luther called Confirmation *affen spiel*—monkey business—and advocated that people stay away when the bishop came to town to offer the laying of hands. Luther understood that baptism bestowed all that was needed for Christian faith and life—a separate, bishop-approved confirmation was entirely unnecessary. Confirmation as a sacrament that added something to baptism was rejected by Luther, but it is clear that Luther embraced another tradition connected with baptism: catechization. Luther—as well as just about all of the Reformers—emphasized in one way or another teaching the Christian basics. Religious and biblical illiteracy was one of the common problems the Reformers addressed. But in the first full decade of the Reformation, none of the active Reformers were advocating for the establishment of a defined period of religious instruction for adolescents only, much less one that would be concluded with a religious ceremony. So where did Confirmation as Lutherans and other Protestants know it come from? Who is responsible for the reintroduction of Confirmation to the churches that evolve out of the sixteenth-century Reformation?

Confirmation as a sacrament that added something to baptism was rejected by Luther, but it is clear that Luther embraced another tradition connected with baptism: catechization.

Martin Bucer was a south German Reformer who saw himself as a go-between between Luther and Zwingli, and later between the Lutherans and the Calvinists. It was Bucer who was the first to develop a Protestant rite of confirmation. Bucer’s ceremony began its development in 1533 and became official church practice in the German territory of Hesse in 1539. From there, Bucer’s reforming work introduced the Confirmation rite to other places in Europe, including England.

Why did Bucer think such a rite was important? The short answer is: he was in frequent contact with Anabaptists.³¹ The Anabaptists (literally: “rebaptizers”) rejected infant baptism. These “Rebaptizers” held that the true church was made

³⁰“Ecumenical Council of Florence,” Session 8, November 22, 1439, EWTN, <https://tinyurl.com/yc93vnbe>; “Canons on Confirmation,” in *The Council of Trent: Session VII*, March 3, 1547, EWTN, <https://tinyurl.com/ydgrybkf>; “The Catechism of the Catholic Church,” Section 2, Chapter 1, Article 2, No. 1285, <https://tinyurl.com/y7bz54o2>.

³¹What follows is my summary of part of perhaps the best article that one can read if one desires an understanding of how the Reformation turned from the rejection of a rite of Confirmation to the reification of the rite of Confirmation: Amy Nelson Burnett, “Martin Bucer and the Anabaptist Context of Evangelical Confirmation” in *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 68 (1994): 95–122, <https://tinyurl.com/y85r8h8u>.

up of those who freely chose to surrender their lives to Christ and *then* were baptized. Infants and children were not able to make such a choice. Therefore, newcomers who had been baptized as babies were informed that such baptisms were not biblical. Such people were baptized as adults when they joined an Anabaptist community. In the 1520s and '30s, the area around Strasbourg had attracted a large and diverse group of Anabaptist communities. Bucer, a pastor and one of the lead Reformers in Strasbourg, found himself in frequent conversation with Anabaptists and others who questioned the practice of infant baptism. Bucer was critical of the Anabaptists on a number of fronts, including on the subject of rebaptizing believers who had been baptized as infants. Bucer remained steadfast in his opinion that children should be consecrated to God in baptism and instructed in the fundamentals of faith subsequent to baptism.

And yet, Bucer's conversations with the Anabaptists had a certain effect. This effect centered on the terms "commit" (*begeben*) and "surrender" (*ergeben*). As Reformation scholar Amy Nelson Burnett explains, "By 1534 the related concepts of self-surrender [to Christ] and commitment [to obedience] had become a standard part of Bucer's vocabulary, and from then on they occurred in almost all of his writings."³² But the Anabaptist influence on Bucer went beyond terminology; he also appeared impressed by the emphasis on a profession of faith. Bucer openly wondered if it would be useful for the south German churches "to establish a public profession of Christian faith in the church following formal catechization, in which place, it seems, papistic confirmation has insinuated itself; for this especially makes many good people hostile to infant baptism, because there is no public profession of Christian faith."³³

During the 1530s, Bucer continued to dispute with Anabaptists and others about infant baptism and the emphasis on public profession of faith, as he was also thinking that it might be advantageous to create space for such a profession of faith in the place of episcopal Confirmation. Bucer's true concern was not the Anabaptist demand of a public profession of faith and surrender (*ergeben*) to Christ but, as a pastor of souls, for an individual's commitment (*begeben*) to obedience to Christ via the discipline of the church. A public profession of faith by all Christians could also include a public commitment to Christian discipline.

In 1539, Bucer was invited to counter the spread of Anabaptism in Hesse. To do this, Bucer would participate in a series of public disputations with Anabaptists. As a result, the leader of an Anabaptist group, Peter Tasch, expressed a desire to lead his community back to the catholic (Lutheran) faith. Bucer was involved in the process of reconciliation, which involved drafting a Hessian disciplinary order to which Tasch and company would submit themselves. One of the disciplinary ordinances included provision for a Confirmation ceremony that would require all Hessian youth to "surrender themselves publicly to Christ the Lord and to his church" and "to commit [themselves] to the fellowship and obedience of the

³²Quoted in Burnett, "Martin Bucer," 107.

³³Quoted in Burnett, "Martin Bucer," 108–109.

church of Christ.”³⁴ Tasch accepted the terms of the disciplinary order and, as a result, many other Hessian Anabaptists were welcomed back into the territory’s Lutheran churches.

Bucer’s success in introducing evangelical Confirmation in Hesse was not immediately duplicated, yet he persisted. In 1543, he introduced a confirmation ceremony for the church order governing the congregations in the area of Cologne. That same year, he published a catechism for the Strasbourg churches that included instructions for the catechization and confirmation of the city’s youth. Thanks in part to Bucer’s enduring friendship with Philip Melanchthon, the evangelical confirmation ceremony spread to more and more churches, both Reformed and Lutheran. In 1549, Bucer was in political danger due to his ongoing rejection of the Augsburg Interim agreement, so he fled to Cambridge, England, where he was welcomed by the Anglican reformer Thomas Cranmer, and where his ideas regarding Confirmation were met with appreciation.³⁵

CONFIRMATION AFTER BUCER: WHERE ARE WE NOW?

It would take perhaps the rest of the pages of this journal to track the history of Confirmation after the Reformation. From Bucer’s renewal efforts, Confirmation in the Protestant churches took off in a variety of directions.³⁶ That is because the Protestant churches themselves took off in a variety of directions. Reformed (Calvinist) and Lutheran churches eventually adopted and adapted some form of Bucer’s idea of what amounts to a “dry” catechumenate. Churches of the Anglican communion, as well as Methodist churches, retained some of Confirmation’s sacramental implications, although neither group ranks Confirmation with Baptism or the Lord’s Supper. Conversely, the Anabaptist churches and later other churches, including Baptist, Evangelical, and Pentecostal churches, rejected Confirmation in one sense, but, in another sense, replaced it with “believers baptism.” That is, just as Confirmation in the infant-baptizing churches expects the confirmand’s own profession of faith, so also do the non-infant-baptizing churches expect the baptismal candidate’s profession of faith. There is today no uniformity of confirmation practice, just as there is no uniformity of theological understanding about what confirmation actually does, or what it actually is.

Instead of assigning blame, or drawing a complicated family tree of Protestant Confirmation, let me offer a framework for thinking about the history of

³⁴Quoted in Burnett, “Martin Bucer,” 114.

³⁵There is a great deal of relatively recent scholarship on Martin Bucer, including biographies and critical volumes of his writings and correspondence. For a comprehensive volume of essays regarding the many facets of Bucer’s impressive career—including Jim Kittelson’s chapter, “Martin Bucer and the Ministry of the Church”—see D. F. Wright, ed., *Martin Bucer: Reforming Church and Community* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

³⁶For the development of Confirmation in the Lutheran churches from 1520 through the early 1960s, the most thorough treatment is still Arthur C. Repp, *Confirmation in the Lutheran Church* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1964).

confirmation since the Reformation by delineating nine modes that inform the development of Confirmation and "Confirmation ministry" among the churches that evolved out of the sixteenth-century reformations.³⁷

That is, just as Confirmation in the infant-baptizing churches expects the confirmand's own profession of faith, so also do the non-infant-baptizing churches expect the baptismal candidate's profession of faith.

Mode one: Confirmation is *preparation for the Lord's Supper* or a necessary process of education before one can fully participate in the congregation's worship. The rite that concludes this time of preparation is not a stand-alone confirmation rite but the first reception of the Lord's Supper that properly concludes the catechization. This understanding continues to prevail in the Lutheran church, Missouri Synod. In some Lutheran churches that administer first communion before the completion of catechetical instruction, including the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the time of preparation usually called *Confirmation* is for a (recently introduced) rite called *Affirmation of Baptism*.

Mode two: Confirmation is *catechism straight-up*, the view favored by Luther, Philip Melancthon, and Martin Chemnitz. This mode entails ongoing instruction of young people—often in conjunction with their parents. Beginning in toddlerhood, it "ends" when the child is ready to leave the household. It might take the shape of catechesis at home or at church or as part of a retreat or a summer-camp experience. It might happen during worship, perhaps as part of a Lenten preaching series that emphasizes parts of the catechism. Such instruction would not necessarily conclude with a rite or ceremony. In this mode, first communion is clearly a separate event, often taking place while the child or youth is in the midst of or at the completion of a certain phase of instruction.

Mode three: Like Confirmation imagined by Bucer, Confirmation represents a new maturity in Christ, an attaining of learning and humility that leads one to make *a vow of obedience to Christ*. Here the willingness to submit oneself to the rule of Christ includes a willingness also to submit oneself to the discipline of the church and its pastors.

Mode four: Emphasizing the rite itself, this mode sees Confirmation as *a sacrament* in a manner similar to earlier understandings of confirmation (and the present Roman Catholic understanding). Here in the laying on of hands by the pastor or bishop, something is conferred upon the confirmand. Some understood that since Confirmation bestowed the blessing of being able to receive the Lord's Supper, it must contain a *charism*, or spiritual gift. Although no longer connected with receiving the Lord's Supper, this idea of a re-bestowal or, at least, a

³⁷This framework is inspired and informed in part by Luther Lindberg's six "Reformation Emphases" in "Historical Perspective," 52–56.

reawakening of the Spirit is in fact an element of the Affirmation of Baptism rite in the two most recent ELCA hymnbooks.³⁸

Mode five: Confirmation as *a personal conversion*, or experience of transformation, coincides with the advent of the German Lutheran pietistic renewal of the late 1600s. Taking up where Bucer left off, Philip Jacob Spener, an inspiration for Lutheran Pietism, emphasized the subjective dimension of the rite, seeing Confirmation as a renewal of the promises of baptism and quickening of the heart of faith. This view was commensurate with his overall program of bringing “the head into the heart” of the Christian faith.

Mode six: Confirmation as *a completion of baptism*. This view is similar to the act of chrismation in the early church—and Bishops’ Confirmation in the medieval church’s practice. This view was part of what inspired Luther’s rejection of the Confirmation of his day. One tip-off that this mode might be operative today is when a young person completes the period of catechism instruction but is not numbered among the congregation’s “members” because they did not participate in the Confirmation rite.

Mode seven. Confirmation as *a ratification of baptism*. In this view, baptism is complete, yes, but the Confirmation rite is seen as a public way of showing that baptism “took.” The participant’s primary act is to claim baptism, affirming it in front of the church. This is the implied way of conceiving Confirmation in churches that implement the rite of Affirmation of Baptism (or a similar rite) at the culmination of the period of catechetical instruction for adolescents or new members.

Mode eight: Confirmation as *a period of discovery*, a relatively recent phenomenon. This time of discovery primarily emphasizes the exploration of God and God’s revelation in Jesus Christ. Churches that conceive Confirmation in this way envision a broad territory for discovery: discovery of personal belief, personal identity, the neighbor, the neighbor’s faith, creation, and so forth. Here, catechetical instruction shares time with other concerns, such as relationship building, civic engagement, service projects, spiritual practices, as well as worship. In this view confirmation is as much about praising God, getting to know yourself and each other, and doing good in the community as it is about learning the parts of a catechism or the stories of the Bible. A concluding rite may or may not be a part of this period of discovery.

Mode nine: Confirmation as *a culturally embedded rite of passage*, a communal obligation or something so ingrained in the wider community that it requires forethought and intention *not* to do it. This mode of confirmation may be the most common, but is nevertheless likely the one most frowned upon by most church leaders. Where this mode predominates, the result is something like Norway or Germany, countries where the majority are baptized and confirmed, but regular church attendance runs as low as five percent.³⁹ Not only prevalent in the *Volk-*

³⁸*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 227–231.

³⁹Finn Jarle Sæle, “Hvor Mange Aktive Kristne Finnes i Norge?” *Norge Idag* (Norwegian), May 12, 2004, <https://tinyurl.com/yb9h45fa>.

skirche of some of the European nations, this view exists in many regions, communities, and congregations in United States.

Many of the challenges and problems that existed more than twenty-five years ago still exist today. However, it seems that there is one problem that is new. The problem of youth staying away from church after Confirmation has been replaced with youth and their parents staying away from church altogether.

As church leaders and laity reflect on the Confirmation practices and understandings in their contexts, it may be helpful to think about which conceptions dominate: (1) preparation for the Lord's Supper, (2) catechism straight-up, (3) a vow of obedience to Christ, (4) a sacrament, (5) a personal conversion, (6) a period of discovery, (7) a completion of baptism, (8) a ratification of baptism, and/or (9) a culturally embedded rite of passage.

CONCLUSIONS

In preparation for this essay, I read the Fall 1991 *Confirmation* issue of *Word & World*.⁴⁰ (Tip: read the "Face-to-Face" articles featuring Gracia Grindal and Todd Nichol on whether to keep Confirmation or abandon it.⁴¹) Many of the challenges and problems that existed more than twenty-five years ago still exist today. However, it seems that there is one problem that is new. The problem of youth staying away from church after Confirmation has been replaced with youth and their parents staying away from church altogether. The difference between 1991 and 2017 is that in 1991 retention was the major challenge while in 2017 the sudden and steep decline of church affiliation and participation is the problem. We are in a time of vine pruning as discussed in John 15. In such a time, a back-to-basics approach may be the best approach. ⊕

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⁴⁰As this essay is being completed, the entire 1991 *Confirmation* issue is available online at <https://tinyurl.com/ybhqqo6>.

⁴¹Gracia Grindal, "Confirmation Embraced (. . . if done right)," and Todd Nichol, "Confirmation Abandoned (. . . if necessary)," *Word & World* 11, no. 4, (Fall, 1991) 404–407, <https://tinyurl.com/yct3bat9>.