



Confirmation Embraced (...if done right)

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Even if Martin Luther thought confirmation, as he knew it, was “monkey business,” his entire Reformation was centered in teaching. His *Small Catechism* was aimed at the family: father and mother teaching the faith at home. For the past couple of centuries, in Lutheran tradition, confirmation has been a year or two of review, giving young Christians a chance to brush up on the formal teachings of the faith as it had been handed down to them through family devotions, and, in our century, a series of graded Sunday school lessons.

Confirmation instruction prepared children to be teachers of the faith when they began their vocation of parenting. Parents today, unaware of their obligation and privilege to teach, have given this over to the schools and religious authorities who are hard pressed to do it alone. Now we are left with fragments, and it is not working. Because it is not working, some voices urge that we abandon confirmation instruction completely. To abandon an old, useful custom simply because Christendom is dead is to demonstrate clearly our inability to call parents to resume their duties and obligations. *Boyz 'N The Hood*, the controversial film of summer 1991, asks African-American fathers to go against the cultural tide and be fathers. It is a flagrant disregard for the power of habit and ritual in the lives of our children to suggest the church abandon such customs because the culture no longer supports them.

Even though the Search Institute has discovered, after exhaustive research, that 14 year-old boys are pondering things other than God (while girls are turning to God—perhaps because of 14 year-old boys), we should not abandon these children to the terrors of their own devices simply because our theological discourse does not interest them. Theological discourse only rarely interests seminary students. That these same students should go out as pastors or teachers and visit their suffering on 14 year-olds through lectures and exams is a tribute to original sin. What we need to do is figure out how to teach 14 year-olds.

We should teach children to memorize the catechism when they are much younger and can memorize entire movie scripts. If Mom and Dad were to be reinvigorated in their Christian vocations of teaching the faith and would start, as they vow to do at baptism, with the Ten Commandments, Apostles Creed, and

Lord's Prayer when the children were still very young, the memorization component of confirmation would be assumed. Unfortunately we have come to define confirmation as the time when we force our teen-agers to memorize Luther, whom they have not met before. This is a sorry impoverishment of the tradition.

Parents should add Luther's explanations as the child matures, before puberty. If they teach it early enough, when they are still heroes to their children, the children will learn it. Were the word burned into their minds and characters, both from family devotions and improved Sunday School instruction, confirmation instruction would be rather different—a time for the student to test these important sentences. Teenagers are eager for hands-on experience of the faith, for testing it. Is it true they should obey their parents? Not kill, nor commit adultery, steal, bear false witness, covet? What will this look like in their own lives as they discover anew who they are? Is it good news to adolescents that they cannot by their own effort or understanding come to the Lord Jesus or believe on him? How does Luther's explanation of the Lord's Prayer help them pray?

If learned through the earlier years, these would no longer be sentences to gag on, but truths to test even as they shaped the child. If, however, congregations wait until the child is 14 before they begin to set these strong beams into the youngster's character, it will be a bad job, rather like adding bones after the flesh has developed. Teaching is a funny business. What the student has learned before makes many things possible or impossible in the current classroom. We are expecting confirmation and catechization to do in nine months what used to take 14 years. It takes time to build the foundation for a rich life of growing with the biblical story and those simple and profound words of Luther.

When they think of confirmation weary pastors may think they are being sent as sheep unto wolves. Our Lord has a good word for us: Be wise as serpents, innocent as doves. We have to give our children the sense that they can be engaged in the questions of the faith, at their level, with a group of Christian friends and trusted adults. Of course, the culture has changed and no longer supports the daily round of life and work as it did in the past. We are, however, not in the business of waiting for the culture to give us permission to evangelize our children. It is our calling and Christian vocation to teach the faith in our families. If this demands that our families do something different from others, so be it. Churches that make such demands are growing.

This will take cunning. We should design educational programs for the entire congregation so that people in the neighborhood, all around town, will say, Look, over there, they are doing something right, they care about families, about children. I want to go there. They're learning about their faith, about something that matters.

Confirmation, at its best, is a time to stop, review, and test to see whether or not our young people are rooted and grounded in the word. Family devotions and Sunday schools should aim toward it; Sunday morning and Monday morning should be built upon it. Train up children in the way they should go, and when they are old, they will not depart from it. And the parents are twice blessed, for in the giving, they receive the word again and are renewed in their own lives. We teach so that our children may live. Confirmation is for life!

Confirmation Abandoned (...if necessary)

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A waggish friend of mine likes to tell of the Lutheran pastor who could not get a horde of rabbits out of his garden. The pastor tried everything from fences to traps to no avail, but then he hit on a

brilliant idea. One morning he got up, went out to the garden, and confirmed all those rabbits. It worked. He never saw them again. It is a good story and one of those fine American drolleries that will fit any denomination. Make it a Methodist minister or an Episcopal bishop and it will still ring a bell.

While a multitude of lives has been changed for the better by confirmation instruction and some pastors delight in catechizing adolescents, most church folk tremble at the thought of it. The young endure it, their parents literally and figuratively drive them to it, education committees puzzle over what to do about it *this year*, and ministers weary of it. None of this is surprising because confirmation is a problem: historically, theologically, and practically.

In the eastern churches confirmation at the hands of the presiding priest immediately follows baptism. In the western church an independent rite of confirmation followed the rise of the diocesan episcopate. In the early centuries in the west, bishops took it upon themselves to confirm local, presbyterally administered baptisms with oil and the sign of the cross. Theory and practice were elaborately developed throughout the middle ages and confirmation was eventually designated one of several sacraments. Luther and Calvin, however, explicitly rejected confirmation. As one Lutheran encyclopedist summarizes it, Luther considered it “a blasphemous abridgement of Baptism.” While Luther allowed confirmation to continue where necessary as a concession to lay superstition, it was often abandoned by the early Lutherans. When it was widely restored under the aegis of the pietists, it was often in a form borrowed from a Reformed tradition originating with Martin Bucer. According to this tradition confirmation was construed hierarchically, as a moment to surrender to Christ and to the discipline of the church. Lutheran immigrants to the United States generally brought versions of this pietistic, Lutheran-Reformed hybrid with them and it became the prototype for American developments too complex to summarize here. (For this history, Arthur C. Repp’s *Confirmation in the Lutheran Church of 1964* is still the best summary .) It is enough to

say that in spite of valiant work in local congregations and the efforts of theologians and church commissions, American Lutherans do not agree on the meaning or practice of confirmation, although nearly all of them allow that it is a problem.

What does this mean? It is most certainly true that Lutherans cannot arrive at a theological consensus about the meaning of confirmation. Furthermore, the norms of the Lutheran tradition are of little or no help in this matter. Scripture does not speak of confirmation, and the Lutheran confessions mention it only in passing as a “humbug” not to be considered a sacrament, and a rite that has been reserved by the bishops. Some meanings traditionally ascribed to confirmation seem to compromise both baptism and justification: a prerequisite for admission to communion, attaining to “full membership” in the congregation, submission to the discipline of the church, etc. Other notions are so vague as to be indistinguishable from the duties and privileges of daily Christian life: public confession of faith, affirmation of baptism, study of the Bible and the rule of faith. Lutherans who say they know do not agree and there is certainly no ecumenical consensus on the matter. Theologically, confirmation is a cipher.

Almost anyone who opens a journal like *Word & World* knows something about the practical problems created by confirmation. Young people often dread it and are sometimes bitterly alienated from the church as a result of it. Pastors frequently confess that they do not do it

well and that they dislike it intensely. Their honest weariness can breed discouragement about any ministry to youth and their teaching role as a whole. Luther's wonderfully wrought *Small Catechism* has frequently become an object of misunderstanding and contempt when poorly used in confirmation, and that misunderstanding and contempt has often been transferred to instructors, to the church, and to the faith itself. Worst of all, confirmation in its American form has often become a graduation from the church. Like John Updike's fabled Lutheran boy, the rabbits do run.

What to do about this? Where local congregations cannot reckon with their history in such away that they can assign a clear meaning to confirmation and resolve the practical problems associated with it, they might consider abandoning it. They should certainly do so if they find, after an honest look at the situation, that confirmation does more harm than good. If this is the case, confirmation has deserved the most damning of the several epithets Luther applied to it: *Lügenstand* or "fanciful deception." At this point, congregations might consider pursuing a strategy for the education of their young like that outlined in sponsors' promises in Lutheran rites of baptism: regular participation in worship, early involvement of parents in the instruction of the young, teaching the elements of the catechism to little children before they can read, moving on to the study of Bible when children are able to read, and then in good time going on to consistent study of the faith.

I say this with some trepidation, because Lutherans ought not dispense with a venerable tradition lightly. At the same time, I hope that Lutheran congregations will in the future deserve their reputation as centers of mission in a strong teaching church. A care for the nurture of the young is inalienable to the Lutheran tradition as is the freedom to adopt whatever means are best suited to a given time and place. Where confirmation serves the nurture of faith and life it should continue; where it militates against healthy growth it should be abandoned for something better.