



## **Confirmation: The Theological Issues for Lutherans\***

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### PROLOGUE: CONFIRMATION AS A PROBLEM

Once upon a time confirmation “worked” for Lutherans, or so the stories go. On the vast plains and even in the cities of Northern Europe confirmation became an important religious rite. This outcome was not inevitable. Luther’s rejection of the sacramental status of confirmation was expressed clearly in the *Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520). Nevertheless he hesitated to abolish confirmation even at that early date, calling it “a certain churchly rite or sacramental ceremony”; he longed for a renewal of the biblical practice of the laying on of hands, whether in confirmation or healing.<sup>1</sup>

Whatever doubts the reformers may have had, confirmation emerged from the turmoil of the sixteenth century as an important part of the Lutheran ethos. Young people were instructed in Luther’s *Small Catechism*, and on the basis of that instruction experienced a churchly rite more or less elaborate, with greater or lesser informal and family ceremony accompanying it. The instruction must sometimes have been minimal and sometimes excellent. The ceremonies changed through the centuries. But confirmation provided an occasion for instruction, met a need for a rite of passage and offered powerful reinforcement of religious belonging in communities where church and society were virtually coextensive.

As Lutherans immigrated to North America, the rite of confirmation came as part of the package. Lutheran theologians generally emphasized that confirmation

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<sup>1</sup>Martin Luther, *Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), in *Luther’s Works* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1959) vol. 36, 91-92.

was not a sacrament, merely a rite, somehow related to baptism (and generally the prerequisite for first reception of holy communion). The catechism continued to be taught, although in new and expanded American editions with many of the specific questions adapted to the American scene.<sup>2</sup>

But more recently the whole package seemed to be coming apart. The 1970 Lutheran study made a largely successful effort to separate confirmation from first communion. *The Lutheran Book of Worship* later in that decade changed the liturgical dimensions of the rite, making it one (only slightly more elaborate) form of an affirmation of baptism that one might make at various transition points in one’s life.

There has also been less and less consensus about what to teach. A diversity of models is

now available, with many local congregations devising their own, quite individual, patterns of instruction and ritual. Many theologians continue to question the appropriateness of a separate rite of confirmation at all.<sup>3</sup> But for all this, confirmation has held on, despite the lack of a completely consistent account of what it is supposed to be.

Clearly confirmation can be many things, and might even one day disappear as a pattern of instruction and rite of passage for adolescent Christians. But what theologically is at stake for Lutherans in any new proposals that might be addressed? This paper tries to underscore three Lutheran commitments that need to be maintained in any agenda for the renewal or reformation of confirmation ministry.

## I. CONFIRMATION AND BAPTISM

Lutherans have strong and hardly original commitments to the importance of the sacrament of baptism. Baptism is a clear form of the gospel, by which saving faith in Jesus Christ comes to us. It is necessary, given the fallen nature of humanity. It is effective, in that—in the words of the *Augsburg Confession*—“grace is offered through it.” Children are not to be excluded from baptism “for in Baptism they are committed to God and become acceptable to him.”<sup>4</sup>

This high sacramental view of baptism has been reinforced through the centuries by the simple words of Luther’s *Small Catechism*. There baptism is celebrated as “not merely water, but water used according to God’s command and connected with God’s word.” The effect or gift of baptism is nothing less than forgiveness of sins, deliverance from death, and eternal salvation to all who believe.<sup>5</sup>

This “real presence” understanding of baptism is not a Lutheran innovation,

<sup>2</sup>Note the austerity of praise for confirmation in a typical turn of the last century compendium—Henry Eyster Jacob’s *A Summary of the Christian Faith* (Philadelphia: General Council Publication House, 1907). Jacobs teaches that confirmation “is without the authority of any command of Christ. As an ecclesiastical rite, it has been used with profit; but this is all that can be claimed for it” (316). See also his vigorous denial that confirmation is a renewal of the baptismal covenant (340).

<sup>3</sup>Most influentially critical for the ELCA has been the view of Robert Jenson in *Visible Words* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), beginning with the assertion, “There can be no justification of separated confirmation” (163).

<sup>4</sup>These affirmations are found in the opening articles of the *Augsburg Confession*, especially II, IV, and V. Baptism itself is discussed in Article IX. *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore Tappert (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1959) 29-31, 33.

<sup>5</sup>*Book of Concord*, 348-9.

but part of the inherited catholic tradition of the church. The article on baptism in the *Augsburg Confession* was one of those unconditionally accepted by the *Roman Confutation*.<sup>6</sup> This claim for baptism parallels the Lutheran confidence in the efficacy of the preached word and of the Lord’s Supper, all three of which are means by which the grace of God in Jesus Christ comes to us and in which God gives “the Holy Spirit, who works faith, when and where he pleases, in those who hear the Gospel.”<sup>7</sup>

In America this sort of teaching about baptism has been very difficult to sustain for three reasons. First, the general Protestant climate has been heavily influenced since the eighteenth

century by revivalism of a Methodist or Baptist sort, with its strong sense that a sacrament is inadequate until supplemented or completed by some experience of conversion or personal confession of faith.

Second, many of the churches that share the catholic tradition of baptismal teaching, while not formally abandoning this, have tended in recent years to speak of baptism as one part of Christian initiation, with the real sacramental center shifting toward the Lord's Supper. Baptism itself becomes preliminary, a kind of admission ticket to the eucharist which is the effective center of grace in the Christian life.

Third, much modern baptismal theology has been shaped by the European dissatisfaction with state-church forms of Christendom, in theologians from Kierkegaard to Barth to Moltmann. This has made many American Lutherans nervous about whether infant baptism can be justified at all, except perhaps in a few cases of the children of highly committed members.

In the midst of these theological currents, confirmation comes to be viewed variously as necessary for completing baptism or as unnecessary competition to it. Some want to keep it as a Lutheran form of owning the covenant, activating the potential of baptism with personal commitment. Others want to eliminate it as a separate rite, incorporating chrismation and the laying on of hands as part of an initiation rite including baptism, confirmation, and first reception of the Supper.

But for any renewed understanding of confirmation that will be confessionally credible, the key issue is that whatever is done be done in such a way that it undercut neither the centrality of baptism nor the character of Christian identity, whenever it comes, as a gracious gift of God. I believe that it is possible to have a separate rite of confirmation, and even desirable to do so. But the key test question for Lutherans must be not whether what is done fits with earlier patterns from the history of the church, but whether it fosters an appreciation of the mystery of baptism itself.

Luther is very helpful on this point, reminding us not to rush past baptism which deserves life-long consideration. He writes in the *Large Catechism*:

In Baptism, therefore, every Christian has enough to study and to practice all his life. He always has enough to do to believe firmly what Baptism promises and brings—victory of death and the devil, forgiveness of sin, God's grace, the entire Christ, and the Holy Spirit with his gifts. In short the blessings of Baptism are so boundless that if timid nature considers them, it may well doubt whether they could all be true.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup>*Book of Concord*, 178 n.1.

<sup>7</sup>CA V, *Book of Concord*, 31.

<sup>8</sup>*Book of Concord*, 441-2.

This life-long meditation on baptism will take different forms, depending on whether the person was baptized as an infant or as an adult. Confirmation offers possibilities of teaching and celebrating the meaning of baptism for those baptized as infants, so long as neither the instruction nor the rite conveys the impression that what was once potential (in baptism) is now actual (in confirmation)—whether through study or through ceremony. If that impression is

given, it would be better to abandon confirmation completely.<sup>9</sup>

## II. CONFIRMATION AND CATECHESIS

A first Lutheran priority is protecting the integrity of baptism as a means of grace. But a second one has to be balanced and considered with it, the priority of pressing for informed and instructed faith. Luther's passion for teaching stands alongside the catholic affirmations in the *Augsburg Confession* and in the two catechisms, and is just as much a part of our confessional heritage.

Though justification by faith was named the article by which the church stands or falls, working out the implications of that doctrine led quickly into adventures in reform in every aspect of human life. And just as the reformers rejected the notion that justification was the enemy of good works, rightly understood, so they give no indication that a grace-centered church can dispense with teaching.

The pain of the actual church conditions that Luther found in Saxony in his day still echoes to readers of the preface to the *Small Catechism*. But that disappointment led to an appeal for teaching, by all who could play a role, and to all who needed to receive it:

I therefore beg of you for God's sake, my beloved brethren, who are pastors and preachers, that you take the duties of your office seriously, that you have pity on the people who are entrusted to your care, and that you help me to teach the catechism to the people, especially those who are young.<sup>10</sup>

We can note a helpful double thrust here—catechetical teaching is desirable for all, but especially for those who are young. Instruction in the basic matters of the faith ought to be a life-long concern, but there is special opportunity for work with young people.<sup>11</sup>

In fact the confessions say very little about a rite of confirmation (its necessary or sacramental character is denied, as we shall see), but a great deal about catechesis. They display a passion for teaching the faith that is as characteristic of the Reformation as its insistence on the centrality of justification.

This suggests in some ways that far more important than the future of confirmation is the future of catechesis. Lutherans have in the past made such

<sup>9</sup>For those baptized as adults, and for those whose confirmation experience was in some way defective, other occasions must be found. The annual celebration of the Baptism of Our Lord on the Sunday after Epiphany is one such opportunity. The use of Lent for continuing catechetical instruction for the whole community is another. Rites for joining a congregation need to be formulated in such a way that while commitment is expressed, the grace of God in calling women and men to faith is the central reality of the liturgy.

<sup>10</sup>*Book of Concord*, 338.

<sup>11</sup>Luther is quite adamant that they should not be admitted to the sacrament without previous instruction. See *Large Catechism*, in *Book of Concord*, 362 (and also p. 447 for an important repetition of this intention).

instruction of their young people a central value for their church, but this has been more and more difficult to maintain in recent years. Not only has the complexity of modern life worked against the church's setting high demands, but church leaders themselves seem to experience some uncertainty about what to teach and how to teach it.

Christians in America live in a society that is increasingly secular, one in which families and schools and local communities give very little reinforcement to Christian faith. Yet, strangely and sadly, just when teaching is more and more needed, it may be less and less available. Some recent studies have suggested that Lutherans do not do a particularly good job today of carrying out their traditional concern for teaching the faith.

Other currents in American life may also make this task difficult. There is a long-noted anti-intellectualism in our society, and especially in several strands of American religion, that makes for public skepticism about whether there is much to “learn” about Christianity. It is widely perceived to be a more a matter of feelings, and of private, personal feelings at that.

It is hard to imagine that Lutheran adolescents in America today can receive any form of instruction that will give them all they will need for the rest of their lives as Christians in a pluralistic world. The stress must be, as always, on the basics, on things which, as Luther says, “have been the heritage of Christendom from ancient times.”<sup>12</sup> Such attention to commandments, creed, and Lord’s Prayer will also be attention to the faith in its most ecumenical form, not exclusive preparation to be a Lutheran Christian.<sup>13</sup>

But because of the developmental limitations of even older adolescents, such teaching of basic content of the faith will have to be done in a way that also points beyond itself to those mysteries of God which are a life-long task to comprehend. Specifically the sense that we are received by God through grace, for Christ’s sake, may have to be tested for a long period before it can be owned as the wonderful surprise that it always is, especially in a Pelagian, achievement-oriented society like ours.

If the Lutheran church is free to have a rite of confirmation, so long as it does not compromise the uniqueness of baptism, it is compelled by its confessions (and their understanding of faith) even more strongly to be a church that provides catechetical instruction to people of all ages, especially to its own young people. The renewal of a sense of urgency for that task, particularly to adult church leaders who grew up in a less secular, more homogeneous world, may be the largest challenge in this area facing the church today.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup>*Large Catechism, Book of Concord*, 362.

<sup>13</sup>Congregations need help in seeing that their task is not simply the nurture of future leaders and members of their own local community, but training for service in the larger, ecumenical church. When this point is rightly understood in a mobile society like the United States, catechesis can be seen as a form of mission.

<sup>14</sup>I have written elsewhere about the renewed importance of the concept of vocation for young Christians in a society like ours that lures them with very confusing and contradictory notions of freedom and self-fulfillment— notions which need to be reformulated by contact with the ethic of the Christian community. This can be done in a way that does not elevate church vocations over others, does not deny Christian freedom to youth, but that takes an active, curious interest in the kinds of educational, vocational, and relational decisions they are making. See my article “Continuing Confirmation: The Road Forward” in *The Mt. Airy Parish Practice Notebook* (Winter, 1989); reprinted in *The Bride of Christ* XIII/3 (1989) 5-7.

### III. CONFIRMATION AND RITES OF PASSAGE

Lutherans are committed to a theology of grace that provides a norm for both liturgical and catechetical aspects of confirmation. They have a tradition of catechetical teaching, especially of young Christians, that can be a powerful tool for the renewal of such instruction today. But they also have a commitment to freedom and diversity in the church that has

implications for the problem of confirmation.

The *Augsburg Confession* contains a sharp affirmation of this commitment: With regard to church usages that have been established by men, it is taught among us that those usages are to be observed which may be observed without sin and which contribute to peace and good order in the church, among them being certain holy days, festivals, and the like. Yet we accompany these observances with instruction so that consciences may not be burdened by the notion that such things are necessary for salvation.<sup>15</sup>

Is confirmation among these “church usages that have been established by men?” This is the clear position of at least the *Apology*, where Melancthon says “confirmation and extreme unction are rites received from the Fathers which even the church does not require as necessary for salvation, since they do not have the command of God.”<sup>16</sup>

Now it has been widely noted that confirmation does not work for everyone (many of us have known individual cases of real resistance to being confirmed that had to be taken seriously). Nor does confirmation work equally well in all geographical or cultural settings, even within the United States. And yet it works very well for many persons in many places, in defiance of the earlier predictions of some experts that it would soon collapse as a meaningless rite.

This confessional commitment of the church suggests a way of proceeding that both refuses to make a necessity of the rite of confirmation, but also creates space for there to be such a rite as being consistent with the gospel.

Because we can remember a time when confirmation seemed to work for all, some in the Lutheran church will want to try to hold out for a universal or near-universal participation in a rite of confirmation. But this violates the Christian freedom affirmed in the confessions themselves. It is a memory more of a historical accident (the homogeneity of Northern Europe and of those communities transplanted to North America in the first generations) than of a specific confessional mandate.

Others argue that since the rite does not work for all, it should not be allowed for any. And yet this violates the permissive, enabling sense of Article XV of the *Augsburg Confession*. Confirmation is a rite of human institution which cannot be made a universal phenomenon (it makes no sense at all in the case of those baptized as adults, where it should rightly be part of the baptismal service itself). Yet it clearly does have a kind of continuing value for many which can allow the church not only to tolerate it, but even, if it chooses, to encourage participation in such a rite for all of its young people.

Here the church is expressing its freedom to have a history, to have tradi-

<sup>15</sup>CA XV, *Book of Concord*, 36.

<sup>16</sup>*Book of Concord*, 212.

tions, to live in particular cultures, to develop Christian rites of passage. Confirmation has been one of these, and if its meaning changes as the vestiges of Christendom melt away, that does not mean it is incapable of having continuing meaning or new meaning for Christian youth who are making the transition from family life to independent life in a highly pluralistic world.

In fact, a rite like confirmation might yet come to be different things in different places if the church allows the freedom for such developments to take place. This seems unlikely to me, as the church is likely to want to try to hold onto some consistency of patterns and goals. But confessionally the boundaries are clear. Confirmation cannot be demanded from the baptized. Nor can it be abolished, unless it should be shown that it is inherently “contrary to the Gospel and the teaching about faith in Christ.”<sup>17</sup> I cannot see how this could be so, beyond the possibility of reform.

#### EPILOGUE: CONFIRMATION AS AN OPPORTUNITY

This paper began by speaking of confirmation as a problem. It clearly is that, because it brings diverse goals and traditions and cultural contexts into dialogue with each other. The work of renewing confirmation ministry and planning for the future is slippery, partly because it is hard to see the future (let alone the present), and partly because diverse goals need to be protected. Neither the grace of baptism nor the good of catechesis nor the freedom from and for ceremonies provides the one key that will unlock what we ought to do just now.

But if confirmation is a problem, it is also an opportunity. I have come to think increasingly that the failure to develop church practice into a single consistent pattern of what confirmation should be is actually a blessing to the church. It is part of the breathing room in Christian identity that allows the church both continuity and change through the centuries.<sup>18</sup>

But, as in Luther’s time, the central opportunity remains the opportunity for instruction of the church’s own young people in the faith they have received in baptism and by which they will live their adult lives. The task is messy and contradictory, paralleling the situation of these young people themselves. But it is also a great opportunity, when viewed rightly, both for teaching and for celebrating a key passage in the lives of young Christians.

<sup>17</sup>CA XV, *Book of Concord*, 36-37.

<sup>18</sup>In this respect confirmation may be very much like the diaconate, often helpful, occasionally an obstacle, but free to be used to a greater or lesser extent as the church's particular needs demand. Part of what the Holy Spirit may use to allow the church to expand in space and survive in time are these accordion-factors which should then not be fastened down too tightly.