



The Future of Confirmation: A Proposal

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BEING A MEMBER OF THE BODY OF CHRIST MEANS PARTICIPATING IN CHRIST'S mission to the world, since Christ himself came on a mission (John 3:16) and commanded the church to take up the mission of proclaiming the gospel and making disciples (Matt 28:18-20; Luke 24:46-49). The sacrament of baptism, which makes one a member of the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:13), therefore constitutes initiation into the mission that Christ gave to the church. For a person baptized in infancy, the rite of confirmation (or in some denominations a rite of "affirmation" or "renewal" of baptism) is the means of personally accepting and committing oneself to the gospel mission. This understanding of confirmation is especially apparent in the rite used for confirmation in *Lutheran Book of Worship*, namely, "Affirmation of Baptism." This rite, like other contemporary confirmation or affirmation/renewal of baptism rites, assumes that (1) being a member of the body of Christ means taking mission seriously, and (2) the rite of confirmation is pivotal in fulfilling one's vocation as a member of the body of Christ.

Arguably, our present age requires that the rites used for confirmation have a sharper focus on participation in the congregation's life and mission. What this article offers is a proposal for reshaping confirmation rites in order to meet this challenge. Because it is most familiar to the author, *Lutheran Book of Worship's* rite of Affirmation of Baptism will be the focus of this proposal. (Readers from other tra-

Confirmation is neither the mature ratification of vows made by parents at infant baptism nor any form of entrance into church membership. It should be instead a commissioning for service in the church, and the confirmation rite should make this clear.

ditions can make applications to their own theologies and rituals of confirmation.) After evaluating this rite, thereby surfacing problems that suggest the need for further reform of confirmation rites, this article will offer a new way of ritualizing confirmation that gives added emphasis to one's acceptance of the body of Christ's mission in/to the world.

I. THE RITE OF AFFIRMATION OF BAPTISM IN *LUTHERAN BOOK OF WORSHIP*

In certain ways, *Lutheran Book of Worship's* rite of Affirmation of Baptism represents some liturgical and theological progress over previous Lutheran confirmation rites. Noteworthy is the increased emphasis on participation in the church's life and mission. Consider, for example, the minister's address to the confirmands (#5): "Dear friends, we rejoice that you now desire to make public profession of your faith and assume greater responsibility in the life of our Christian community and its mission in the world."¹ The missional emphasis is also evident in the statement of intentions (#14): "Do you intend...to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, to serve all people, following the example of our Lord Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth?"² By contrast, *Service Book and Hymnal*, a predecessor to *Lutheran Book of Worship*, asked, "Do you promise to abide in this Faith and in the covenant of your baptism, and as a member of the Church to be diligent in the use of the Means of Grace and in prayer?"³ This question, unfortunately, could be interpreted to mean that the Christian life, except for prayer, is merely the passive reception of the church's ministrations, rather than active involvement in the church's mission to the world. Also, Affirmation of Baptism in *Lutheran Book of Worship*, unlike *Service Book and Hymnal*⁴ and the previous *Agenda*⁵ of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, contains no formal admission to Holy Communion or other member privileges, thereby taking a major step toward disassociating confirmation with church membership.⁶ In so doing, Affirmation of Baptism helps to undergird the understanding that *baptism* constitutes full initiation into the body of Christ.

Yet the confirmation use of Affirmation of Baptism in *Lutheran Book of Worship* is problematic in at least two ways. First, the confession of faith could possibly be interpreted as a ratification of the "vows" (i.e., confession of faith) made by parents

¹*Lutheran Book of Worship: Ministers Desk Edition* (Minneapolis: Augsburg; Philadelphia: Board of Publication, Lutheran Church in America, 1978) 324.

²*Ibid.*, 326.

³*Service Book and Hymnal* (Minneapolis: Augsburg; Philadelphia: Board of Publication, Lutheran Church in America, 1958) 246.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵*Agenda* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1948) 26.

⁶Of course, the separation of confirmation and first communion reflects a decision made by the American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church in America to permit children in the fifth grade (or age 10) to commune. For an explanation and background to this decision, see *The Report of the Joint Commission on the Theology and Practice of Confirmation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg; Philadelphia: Board of Publication, Lutheran Church in America; St. Louis: Concordia, 1970).

at one's baptism as an infant. In other words, the rite is open to the interpretation that "I am now standing on my own two feet confessing the faith for myself." From a purely rationalistic point of view, perhaps that understanding makes sense. But from a theological point of view, the "making it my own" understanding implies that baptism administered to infants is contingent or conditional on a subsequent confession of faith, and is thus something less than full initiation. As Martin Marty noted:

[M]ost attempts to define confirmation too precisely as a ratification of baptism, a person's reasserting of formal baptismal vows to "make them mine," issue in a failure to preserve the uniqueness of the baptismal promise. They imply an incompleteness about baptism to which the New Testament does not admit.⁷

Even though the address that begins "Brothers and sisters in Christ, in Holy Baptism our Lord Jesus Christ received you and *made you members of his church*" (#12, emphasis added) affirms that baptism is full Christian initiation, the action of the confirmands repeating the baptismal creed—in some minds ratifying their infant baptism—might speak louder. Certainly, a better understanding of this rite is possible, namely, that it is a solemn recalling of what God did for us in baptism and a pledge to live out the implications of baptism. But within an ecclesial context in which infants are the normal candidates for baptism it is difficult, if not impossible, to escape the sense that a rite administered to adolescents constitutes a mature confession of faith that somehow validates a baptism administered in infancy—especially when this rite contains the same profession of faith used at baptism. Ultimately, we must ask ourselves whether Affirmation of Baptism actually ritualizes what we think it ritualizes.

Second, confirmation is still indirectly associated with membership. The problem, specifically, is the fact that Affirmation of Baptism can be used for confirmation *as well as* reception into membership and restoration to membership.⁸ While this was an ingenious way of showing that all three rites are rooted in baptism, the same connection subtly implies that confirmation has something to do with church membership. It would be best, therefore, to avoid celebrating confirmation along with reception into membership or restoration to membership so as not to heighten the association. Doubtless, however, some pastors will celebrate all three rites together anyway, having missed the theological implications of such an action.

Part of the problem here is with the cultural understanding of "membership." In North America, membership is often understood in a highly individualistic sense: one pays dues to an association of one sort or another and then participates to a self-determined degree. In many cases, one can be a "member" of a society or group without having to participate in any of its public gatherings or to advocate the group's goals actively and publicly. In the minds of many people, membership in a group has little to do with personally advancing the group's mission in the

⁷Martin Marty, *Baptism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 45.

⁸Within the rite, separate sections for "confirmation," "reception into membership," and "restoration to membership" contain material for each of these uses (*Lutheran Book of Worship: Ministers Desk Edition*, 324).

world. Perhaps the association of confirmation with membership would not be so undesirable if Christians had a strong communal/ecclesial understanding of church membership, one that flowed out of a sound baptismal theology. But such an understanding is difficult to maintain in the North American cultural context and in a religious culture that privatizes faith and church membership. A rite used for confirmation would ideally downplay membership and emphasize discipleship. Clearly, then, the reform of confirmation rites (that is, rites for the acceptance of the church's mission) needs to continue.

II. TOWARD A NEW RITUALIZATION OF CONFIRMATION

Besides avoiding the impression of being a mature confession of faith to ratify an infant baptism or of being a church membership rite, a new rite for confirmation must take seriously the idea that confirmation (as instruction) equips a person for assuming "greater responsibility in the life of [the] Christian community and its mission in the world."⁹ An early proposal for doing precisely this was made by Hans C. Boehringer, the primary drafter of the rite of Holy Baptism in *Lutheran Book of Worship*. He suggested that the rite used for confirmation should become a "lay ordination," focusing on prayer for the person who is accepting his or her mission as a Christian in the world, and should be shorn of its baptismal trappings in order to avoid the appearance of an initiation rite.¹⁰

Following Boehringer's proposal, I suggest making confirmation a *commissioning* for service in the church that involves two stages.¹¹ Stage one, which takes place during the Sunday morning service, would consist of the recognition of and intercession for those who have completed confirmation instruction.¹² Model recognition addresses and intercessions similar to those used for first communion in *Lutheran Book of Worship: Ministers Desk Edition* could be provided.¹³ Or, there could be a separate rite entitled "Recognition of Those Completing Confirmation Ministry." Stage two involves a rite that ritualizes acceptance of the church's mission by formally commissioning a person for a specific (lay) ministry in the local congregation.¹⁴ This

⁹*Lutheran Book of Worship: Ministers Desk Edition*, 324.

¹⁰See Hans C. Boehringer, "Baptism, Confirmation, and First Communion: Christian Initiation in the Contemporary Church," Valparaiso Institute of Liturgical Studies Occasional Papers No. 1 (Valparaiso: Institute of Liturgical Studies, 1981) 86-87.

¹¹Properly speaking, *baptism* constitutes ordination to the lay priesthood. What is needed, then, is a rite that installs one into a specific ministry, i.e., a commissioning.

¹²Part of the goal of confirmation instruction, ideally, would be to help a young person discern his or her area of ministry within the church.

¹³See p. 31.

¹⁴Taking responsibility for a ministry within the congregation means taking responsibility for the church's mission. A person's installation or commissioning as a lector or other worship minister, for example, signifies that person's acceptance of the church's mission, since the church's mission is to gather for word and sacrament in order to be the visible embodiment of God's mission of reconciliation toward the world. See Thomas H. Schattauer, "Liturgical Assembly as Locus of Mission," in *Inside Out: Worship in an Age of Mission*, ed. Thomas H. Schattauer (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999) 1-21. Insofar as other ministries of the church (learning, service, stewardship) are also the locus of God's mission, participation in them likewise constitutes acceptance of responsibility for the church's mission.

celebration would occur soon after the recognition of the completion of confirmation ministry—perhaps as early as the following Sunday. The recognition of ministry for those not discerning a call to a congregational ministry soon after completing the confirmation process would occur whenever that discernment subsequently happens, whether it be months or even years hence. For such persons, the rite that recognizes their completion of the confirmation process is an opportunity for the congregation to pray for God’s continued guidance of their discernment process. Hence, the first-stage rite is more than a celebration of educational achievement.

Rather than having a separate and distinct rite, stage two of confirmation would be ritualized with (and become one *use of*) a modified form of *Lutheran Book of Worship: Occasional Services*’ rite of Recognition of Ministries in the Congregation.¹⁵ A prayer for the confirmands only could be inserted following the prayers for the specific ministries and before the concluding prayer.¹⁶ The language of the prayers for confirmands would focus on service in the church and avoid language suggesting that confirmation is of equal status to baptism. Such prayers might look like the following:

For Confirmation:

Gracious Father, pour out upon *Name* a spirit of self-denying service, that *he/she* may reflect the glory of Christ through *his/her* ministry in the church.

OR

Lord of the church, strengthen in *Name* the gifts for ministry in the church, that *he/she* may serve with a willing and glad heart to the honor and glory of your holy name.

OR

Father, confirm in *Name* the mind of Christ, that *his/her* life may be an offering of loving service to the church.

This modified rite would continue to be called “Recognition of Ministries in the Congregation,” and would be placed in the pew edition of the worship book. Arguably, a rite that highlights the ministry of the laity needs to be in the book used by the laity!

Perhaps what is most significant about this schema is the built-in flexibility for celebrating confirmation (i.e., Recognition of Ministries) on an *ad hoc* basis. Such flexibility enables confirmation to avoid the appearance of a *contrived* acceptance of responsibility for service in the church—as if age or the completion of a confirmation program automatically makes a person spiritually ready for this task. Notably, some people do not take personal ownership for the church’s mission until late adolescence or young adulthood, e.g., during college or when they become

¹⁵*Lutheran Book of Worship: Occasional Services* (Minneapolis: Augsburg; Philadelphia: Board of Publication, Lutheran Church in America, 1982) 143-146.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 145

parents. Arguably, then, the ritualization of acceptance of the church's mission needs to reflect human realities or risk discrediting itself and the church.

There are at least three reasons why the rite used for confirmation should give even more focus to the acceptance of mission in the way suggested above. First, North American culture in general can no longer be counted on to support a person in his or her Christian life. As far as our culture is concerned, being a Christian is a private choice. Therefore, American culture gives no more affirmation to a person for being a Christian than it gives to a person for buying a certain brand of oatmeal or facial tissue. Indeed, the ethos of late-twentieth/early-twenty-first-century America is that a person should even explore various spiritual or religious traditions. During the past three decades, in fact, many Christians blended Eastern (e.g., Buddhist) and Native American spiritualities with their own Christian devotion. In such a cultural/ethical environment, Christians perceive little if any positive reinforcement for having a strong commitment to their Christian vocation. Second, the influence of consumerism has reduced the Christian faith to a commodity used when needed, thereby obscuring the traditional understanding of the Christian faith as a way of life. Many pastors have experience with persons or families who rarely bother with the church except when they "need" a rite, such as baptism, marriage, or a funeral. The ideas of Christian vocation and participation in the church's mission are foreign to many American Christians. Third, the influence of religious television invites a passive understanding of what it means to be a Christian: one simply receives the ministrations of the "church," and how one responds to those ministrations is a matter of personal choice.

All of these factors, of course, gave rise to the reforms of confirmation in the 1970s. But they are even more influential today, and their influence is even detectable in the church. One might note, for example, how in the 1990s churches reflected the consumerism of American culture by marketing different worship services to target audiences and how the so-called "mega-churches" provided shopping-mall atmospheres for their members and worshipers. Additionally, during this same period, the entertainment industry left its mark on the church in the form of worship that reduces the assembly to passive spectators. As Marva Dawn has noted, churches now "cater to the 'couch potato' lifestyle by reducing worship to easy listening with not much involvement, with everything done by the pastor and worship band." Dawn then notes that this practice "is detrimental to character formation because faith must be *practiced*, because to worship God requires [the] investment of ourselves."¹⁷ Thus, the formation of Christians who are committed to the church's mission is now an even greater challenge for the church, since the religious culture of America currently gives less support to a person's full participation in the church's life and mission.

Thus, a rite for confirmation cannot treat the issue of participation in the

¹⁷Marva Dawn, *A Royal "Waste of Time": The Splendor of Worshiping God and Being Church for the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 232.

church's mission as an abstraction. Rather, this rite should be related to a concrete reality in a person's life, namely, a specific lay ministry to which he or she has been called by God and the church for the sake of the church's mission. If the sacraments are individualized and personalized applications of the gospel that initiate us into the church (baptism) and sustain us in our faith (eucharist), then it is only fitting that a person's response to the gospel be a commitment to a ministry that requires his or her *unique* gifts and skills.

III. POSSIBLE OBJECTIONS

Undoubtedly, this proposal will raise objections. Some critics will question the lack of a renunciation and confession of faith using the baptismal creed. They might say that a solemn and public remembrance or affirmation of baptism is appropriate for those baptized in infancy and that using the baptismal creed on this occasion makes liturgical sense. But the baptismal creed is precisely what gives the impression that confirmation is a confession that a person makes as a "mature" and/or "responsible" Christian—which implies that baptism administered to infants is insufficient or contingent. By changing the ritual model of confirmation from a quasi-repetition of baptism to the acceptance of mission (i.e., to a commissioning) we avoid this impression. Also, the new rite for confirmation proposed here can easily note that acceptance of the church's mission is an implication of baptism.¹⁸ In other words, it can affirm that accepting the church's mission constitutes an affirmation of baptism.

Other critics might reject this proposal because, in their view, it offers a ritually-impooverished rite when just the opposite is needed. They would argue that a cultural need for an adolescent rite of passage represents an opportunity for the church to show its concern for those experiencing the personal struggles and upheavals of adolescence. The rite used for confirmation, like the church's rites for the sick or those who are to marry, is a means of sanctifying persons at a particular stage of life in order to strengthen them for Christian witness in the world.¹⁹ Moreover, these critics might argue, strong ritual gestures such as hand-laying and prayer for the Holy Spirit's strengthening are needed in order to (1) make the rite for confirmation more than a sentimental coming-of-age rite and (2) express God's love in a highly personal way.

But it is unclear whether human maturity demands a ritualization. All stages of human development, of course, create challenges for which individuals need spiritual help and strength in order to remain a faithful Christian witness. Recent decades have seen the development of the notion of the "mid-life crisis." As our society ages, we have become more aware of the physical and emotional difficulties

¹⁸Note, for example, how *Lutheran Book of Worship: Occasional Services'* rite of Recognition of Ministries in the Congregation begins: "Dear Christian friends, baptized into the priesthood of Christ, we are called to offer ourselves to the Lord of the church in thanksgiving for what he has done and continues to do for us" (143).

¹⁹See the editorial by Glenn Stone, "Confirmation and First Communion (II)," *Lutheran Forum* (May 1969) 18-19.

faced by the elderly. But the church has found no need to ritualize mid-life or old age. Instead, it offers the sacraments: baptism, which renews the already-baptized; the eucharist, which visibly proclaims and offers the forgiveness of sins; and individual confession and absolution, which enables us to live out the baptismal reality of Christian life. Hence, in its sacraments, the church already has resources that can (1) assure adolescents of God's love and forgiveness in the midst of their feelings of rejection, and (2) allow them to experience tangibly their Christian identity amid an identity crisis. Perhaps, then, what is needed is not a ritually "beefed up" confirmation, but a more potent sacramental life. This would mean, among other things, baptismal celebrations that make abundant use of water in order to highlight the meaning of baptism as a washing or drowning; weekly celebrations of the eucharist; a focus on liturgy and sacraments in Christian education; and preaching that illumines the meaning of the sacraments for daily life. Such a sacramental emphasis can more than adequately aid those facing the trials of adolescence or any other life stage.

Some thirty years ago Lutherans in North America, like other denominations, undertook a reform of confirmation, most notably by separating confirmation from first communion and by reconceiving of the rite of confirmation as a solemn acceptance of the body of Christ's mission in the world. Yet further reform of confirmation is necessary in order to (1) avoid the suggestion that confirmation is a ratification of baptism for those baptized in infancy and (2) emphasize acceptance of the church's mission. Doubtless, the suggestions made in this article are neither perfect nor the last word on the subject. Still, if nothing else, this proposal might generate further discussion about how confirmation should relate to one's participation in the mission of the body of Christ. ⊕

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