

THE HISTORICAL, TRADITIONAL, SCRIPTURAL BASIS FOR OUR PRACTICE OF YOUTH CONFIRMATION?

Introduction

The title of this essay has one minor change from the one given by the essay committee and that is the question mark at the end of it, which was added for a couple of reasons. First of all, it gives the opportunity to state that our practice of youth confirmation does not have roots in all three of the areas mentioned. In other words, one cannot dissect the different parts of our confirmation practice and find a basis for each one in all three areas nor can one find a basis for the practice as a whole in all three areas. On the contrary, different parts of our practice have different sources in each of the three areas. In fact, one Lutheran historian described the situation by saying, "As confirmation is practiced today, especially in the United States, it is cluttered with incoherent remnants of its historical development, the origins of which are rarely recognized."¹ The second reason for the question mark is to question the wisdom of placing history, tradition, and Scripture on an equal plane as a basis for this practice or any practice in the church, which the title without the question mark almost suggests. Just as "sola Scriptura" is the basis for our faith so also "sola Scriptura" ought to be the basis for our practice. History and tradition may help us to understand the best and most beneficial method of carrying out the directives of the Scriptures -- experience is often the best teacher -- but should never be allowed to become an independent basis in and of itself. Like the Corinthians we all need to "learn the meaning of the saying, 'Do not go beyond what is written.'"

In addition to narrowing the focus to the single basis of Scripture, it is also important to understand what exactly is meant by a Scriptural basis. The only way in which any practice can be said to have a truly Scriptural basis is if it has been clearly commanded by God and is a command which extends to people living at this present time. So, for example, the sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper, are clearly things which our Lord Christ wants us to practice until the end of time. When Christ instituted Baptism he immediately followed the institution with the words, "And surely I am with you always, *to the very end of the age.*" And when Christ instituted the Lord's Supper he did so with the words, "*Do this in remembrance of me,*" and Paul follows the words of institution by adding, "For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death *until he comes.*" Thus both sacraments have clearly been commanded by God and are to be used by Christians until the end of the age or Judgment Day. On the other hand, practices which have not been clearly commanded by God or do not extend to people living at this present time cannot be said to have a Scriptural basis. For example, when the Seventh Day Adventists insist that the Sabbath must be observed also by Christians they do so without a Scriptural basis even though the Bible contains the command, "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy," since that command does not extend to people living today but was given to the Israelites as a "shadow of the things that were to come." Or when certain segments of the Disciples of Christ forbid the playing of instrumental music in worship because this was the alleged practice of the apostles they do so without a Scriptural basis even though there may be no example of instrumental music in the apostolic church.

Those things neither commanded nor forbidden by God fall under the heading of adiaphora, practices which Christians are free to take or leave without feeling bound in their conscience one way or the other. The only provision in the use of adiaphora is that they be practiced according to the guidelines of the Scriptures. When Paul says, for example, "Everything is permissible for me' -- but I will not be mastered by anything," he means to say that he is free to practice any adiaphora provided that it does not interfere with his love for God and replace God as his master. Or when he says, "Everything is permissible' -- but not everything is constructive," and follows it with the words, "Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others," he

¹ A. C. Repp, *Confirmation in the Lutheran Church*, pg. 155.

means to say that he is free to practice any adiaphora provided that it does not interfere with his love for his neighbor and wound his neighbor's conscience." And when he says, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free," and then says in the same context, "If you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all," he means to say that in a time of confession (i.e. when the truth is being defended against false doctrine) even things which are in and of themselves adiaphora (such as circumcision) are no longer matters of indifference and should not be practiced if others are demanding it or should be practiced if others are forbidding it. In short, Christians are free to practice any adiaphora provided that their use does not violate the heart of God's law (love for God and love for the neighbor) and provided that their use does not compromise one's confession of the truth.

The real question before us then is where our practice of youth confirmation fits into that scenario. Are there elements in our practice which cannot and should not ever be given up because they have been clearly commanded by God? Are there elements which are so beneficial and so constructive that even though they are in and of themselves adiaphora it makes good sense to continue to practice them. And are there elements which should be changed or even abandoned because they are of little or no benefit to anyone or because they compromise our confession of the truth in this day and age? These are the questions which will hopefully be answered by this essay as we consider the various sources of our present practice.

Historical Sketch

Before the Reformation

In his book Confirmation in the Lutheran Church Arthur C. Repp gives us a start in tracing the history of confirmation. He says:

In the early church, confirmation was a part of the rite of Baptism. After the candidates were baptized on Easter Eve, they were "confirmed" with chrism, prayers, the sign of the cross, and the laying on of hands, and on Easter morning they were permitted to make their first Communion.²

As time went on, though, certain changes began to take place. Christianity became an illegal religion in the Roman empire and the object of severe persecution. As the Christian church grew and won converts from paganism, it had to safeguard itself by admitting to baptism only those who had been carefully prepared and instructed. In his essay Confirmation Instruction in Historical Perspective Gustav Wiencke gives us some details:

During this period the catechumens were admitted only to the preaching service. The special acts of consecration used to admit "hearers" (catechumens) to the prayers of the church form the beginning of the present rites of confirmation...Catechumens were received by the laying on of hands, exorcism, and presentation of consecrated salt. Following a rigorous period of prayer, fasting, and confession of sins, they were solemnly baptized (generally by immersion) and admitted to Holy Communion.³

Notice that the sequence in the acceptance of adults into membership was instruction first, then a sort of confirmation rite, then baptism, followed immediately by the Lord's Supper. Already a difference was beginning to develop between the baptism of adults and the baptism of infants. In time, when more and more people were baptized as infants, the practices associated with adult baptism became the rite of confirmation. Furthermore with the reception of great numbers into the church in the fifth century, infant baptism became

² Ibid, pg. 13.

³ G. K. Wiencke, *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*. "Confirmation Instruction in Historical Perspective," pg. 100.

more general. "The old concept of the church as the congregation of the saved was altered to the idea of the church as an institution to mediate salvation."⁴ As the church extended into the Teutonic world the idea of mediating salvation was expanded to the forcible baptism of large masses of people. It was almost inevitable for confirmation to become a separate rite which on the one hand assured the church of the sincerity of its members and on the other hand prepared children for the battle of life. By the first half of the 12th Century Hugo of St. Victor referred to confirmation as the second sacrament and in November 1439 the Council of Florence designated confirmation a sacrament through the papal decree *Pro Armenis* of Eugene IV.⁵ Confirmation was said to "bestow grace and a 'certain spiritual and indelible sign' necessary for salvation, equal in power to all other sacraments."⁶

During the Reformation

As Lutherans we can well imagine how vehemently Luther and the Confessions rejected the Roman concept of confirmation. The Augsburg confession rejects it by implication, and the Apology and the Tractatus reject it expressly. With his usual zeal against any teaching which he believed to be contrary to the Scriptures, "Luther referred to the sacrament as monkey business (*Affenspiel*), fanciful deception (*Lugenstand*), and mumbo-jumbo (*Gaukelwerk*)."⁷ As a rule all the Reformers opposed confirmation as lacking in sufficient scriptural basis and as involving superstitious ceremonial. In very few of the church orders of the early period of the Reformation was any provision made for confirmation.

In those few church orders that did include confirmation there was no uniform practice. Nevertheless Arthur Repp does discern four general types. He labels them "catechetical, hierarchical, sacramental, and traditional." The catechetical laid emphasis on instruction as preparation for first communion and was common among the pupils of Luther, the hierarchical was originated by Johann Bucer and added to confirmation the idea of submission to the discipline of the church, the sacramental either stated or implied the impartation of the Holy Spirit by the laying on of hands, and the traditional attempted to keep as much of the Roman Confirmation as possible, cutting out only those things which were clearly contrary to the Scriptures.

After discussing the various types of confirmation Repp draws several generalizations which may be of some value:

One of the few generalizations that may be made is that Lutherans universally rejected the Roman Catholic doctrine of confirmation as a sacrament...A second generalization is that all Lutheran confirmation forms assumed and/or specified Christian instruction before the catechumen was presented for confirmation or first Communion. The home was considered primarily responsible for the instruction implied by Holy Baptism. Instruction in the home was supplemented by the schools, wherever they existed, and by the church through catechizations, catechetical sermons, and sometimes through public reading from one of the catechisms. Preconfirmation instruction by the pastor was primarily a matter of review or a preparation for the questions required by the rite where it was observed...A third broad generalization that may be made is that confirmation was directly associated with both sacraments, except in the case of the traditional type, which was not widely practiced...a fourth broad generalization is that the usual age of the catechumen who partook of his first Communion was quite early when compared to the present-day practice.⁸

⁴Ibid, pg. 100.

⁵Op. Cit. Repp, pg. 14.

⁶Ibid, pg. 15.

⁷Ibid, pg. 21.

⁸Ibid, pg. 55-60.

After the Reformation

The Reformation was followed by several fairly distinct periods in church history, each of which had an influence on the practice of confirmation. The first was the period of orthodoxy, the effect of which was two extremes. Some churches refused to change with the times. Catechetical instruction had originally been introduced as a method for instructing the entire congregation because of the mass ignorance of the people and their illiteracy. Now the people, even the children, were learning to read and becoming better educated. This made the old practice of catechetical instruction monotonous and invited indifference. Others over-reacted to the change in the times. In 1613 Conrad Dietrich published an instruction book entitled Institutiones Catecheticae, which sought to raise the level of confirmation instruction.⁹ Because this was a time of confession during which the Lutherans had to defend the pure doctrine not only from the influence of Rome but also from the influence of Switzerland and aberrant influences from within her own ranks, this book sought to equip youth with the whole dogmatic armor of Orthodoxy so that they might be able to defend the pure doctrine of Luther from corruption and make even children into fully armed soldiers against any danger which might threaten the Lutheran Church. The result was that Luther's pithy catechism was overlaid with an intellectualized summary of Orthodox doctrine which became wearisome and tedious for many catechumens.

One other addition found its way into confirmation during the period of Orthodoxy. Some Lutheran territories were beginning to be disturbed by the effects of the Counter-Reformation, especially after Frederick August II (1670-1733), elector of Saxony, defected to the Roman Catholics. To meet this attack the confirmation rite for children from the nobility, especially from the ruling class, frequently included a solemn vow that the child remain true to the Lutheran Church.

The period of Orthodoxy was followed by the period of Pietism. It is to the credit of Philip Jacob Spener that there came about a general restoration or introduction of confirmation. He used confirmation instruction to lead children to confess orally to the covenant of baptism, in remembrance of the vow of the sponsors at baptism, and to surrender themselves personally to Christ.¹⁰ A Pietistic view of baptism is evident. This view regarded baptism as more of a covenant between God and men than as a means of regeneration. Hence infant baptism appeared to be incomplete and defective until completed by a conversion experience. Spener believed that confirmation could be utilized ideally to reach the individual and bring about his conversion. While he did not deny the regenerative power of Baptism, he did minimize its continuing power. For him the value of Baptism lay primarily in its covenant which the Christian needed to renew regularly. The principal effect of Pietism on confirmation was not that the rite became more widely accepted in the Lutheran Church but rather that it came to be introduced in a form so foreign to its earlier history. Confirmation's subjective element became its chief characteristic.¹¹

The period of Pietism was followed by the period of Rationalism, which focused attention on the problem, how can one prove religious truths, that is, make them a convincing reality? Instead of viewing confirmation instruction as the transfer of completed religious insights and knowledge into the mind and heart of the child, rationalism sought to lead the child to grow and develop and so discover new religious truths for himself. Instead of memorizing and then developing an understanding, the order was reversed. It was in the period of Rationalism that confirmation was made a firmly established part of the life of the church. With the spread of public education, confirmation became closely linked with graduation from the elementary school. Many outward forms of confirmation, observed in Lutheran churches today, can be traced to this period.

Confirmation in the United States has historically been a reflection of the different customs practiced in the old country. The result has been a practice in the WELS which includes the following elements: 1) a period of confirmation instruction; 2) an examination; 3) a rite of confirmation. Present day confirmation instruction is usually two years in length and involves the memorization of Luther's small catechism, the memorization of

⁹Op. Cit. Wienke, pg. 103.

¹⁰Op. Cit. Repp, pg. 69.

¹¹Ibid, pg. 69.

Bible passages which support the truths taught in Luther's catechism, and catechization using questions and answers and the inductive method of teaching. Present day examination usually involves a list of questions for the most part dealing with doctrine. The present day confirmation rite found in the Lutheran agenda includes confirmation of one's Baptismal covenant, the laying on of hands, a Scripture verse, and the invitation to participate in the rights and privileges of church membership.

History, Tradition, and Scripture

Confirmation Instructions

The concept of having confirmation instructions has at least a partial Scriptural basis. First of all it falls under the heading of general Christian education. When Christ ascended into heaven he commissioned the church with the words, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." This is the basis of our practice of infant baptism because the commission is unlimited. At the same time this is the basis of the church's responsibility in the instruction of children. It is true enough that the Word of God exhorts parents to be the spiritual instructors of their children. Nevertheless this duty has also been given to the church. If we say that those who reject infant baptism are limiting Christ's commission then we also have to say that those who reject the church's responsibility in the instruction of children are limiting the same commission. Confirmation instructions, then, are simply a part of the church's general education program, which clearly has a Scriptural basis.

Secondly, confirmation instructions fall under the heading of preparation for Holy Communion. In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul says, "A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup." From the essayist's point of view a minimum amount of knowledge would be necessary for proper self-examination, knowledge limited to the fundamental doctrines of Christianity. In Christian Dogmatics Franz Pieper introduces the distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental doctrines in the following way:

The distinction...is not a dispensation from accepting certain doctrines of the Bible. No man has the right to discard any Scripture teaching. Scripture expressly forbids it. Christ gave His Church the specific commission: "Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you". And Paul declares: "I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God." In the Old Testament, too, men were forbidden to add to the written Word or to take anything away from it. That means that nothing in Scripture may be regarded as superfluous or worthless...But while all doctrines of Scripture are important and binding, we do well to distinguish between fundamental and non-fundamental doctrines, as Scripture does...The question which articles are "fundamental articles" as distinguished from non-fundamental articles must be answered by Scripture. And Scripture clearly states which articles constitute the foundation of the Christian faith.¹²

Of course, the central doctrine of the entire Scriptures is the doctrine of objective justification which is accepted subjectively by faith so that saving faith is simply and alone faith in the forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake. But such faith presupposes and includes certain other doctrines. Franz Pieper lists them as follows: the doctrine of sin and its consequence of eternal damnation; the doctrine that Christ is God and Man and that God is Triune; the doctrine of redemption as the work of Christ; the doctrine that saving faith is always faith in the Word of Christ; and the doctrine that Christ actually rose physically from the grave.¹³ The doctrines of Baptism and the Lord's Supper are labeled by Pieper as secondary fundamental doctrines because even though they do belong to the foundation of the Christian faith since the forgiveness of sins is conveyed through both of them, it

¹²F. Pieper, Christian Dogmatics. Vol. 1, pg. 80-81

¹³Ibid, pg. 82.

is possible for a person through ignorance of the nature and benefit of the Sacraments, to lack the foundation which the Sacraments supply, but still have true faith in the forgiveness of sins if he trusts in the Word of the Gospel.¹³

It would seem that these fundamental doctrines should be well known by any Christian before he partakes of the Lord's supper. It is interesting to note that with the addition of prayer, these are the basic doctrines which are covered in Luther's small catechism and which alone were required to be known (without explanation) before members were admitted to the Lord's supper at the time of the Reformation. In light of the Scriptural admonition that a person examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup, a period of confirmation instruction in at least the basics can be said to have a Scriptural basis.

There are also some elements of our present practice of confirmation instruction which have their roots in church history. The fact that we use a catechism which covers a rather large body of doctrine and goes off into many different tangents is undoubtedly due in part to the period of orthodoxy, when the purpose for confirmation became the equipping of children with the "armor of Luther's doctrine in all of its aspects." The inductive method of teaching very likely stems from the period of Rationalism, when the goal was to get students to find truth for themselves in the Scriptures rather than simply impart to them a body of religious truth.

To summarize, while the concept of confirmation instruction does have its roots in the Scriptures, there are also aspects of our present practice which have roots in tradition and history.

The Examination

When referring to examination we usually mean a public examination in front of the entire congregation. Since the Sacraments are entrusted to the pastor only by virtue of his call and have actually been given to the church, it is certainly Scriptural to have the catechumen's examined in front of the congregation to assure them (as the possessors of the sacraments) that the catechumens are in fact able to examine themselves. This would also seem to be the basis for the words which introduce the examination in the Lutheran Agenda, "We shall now examine them in the chief parts of Christian doctrine, for the purpose of setting forth that they understand the faith they are about to profess."¹⁴ On the other hand, since the congregation has entrusted the administration of the sacraments to their pastor, they could also entrust the determination as to when a child is able to examine himself to the pastor and dispense with the public examination.

The Rite of Confirmation

Confirmation of the Baptismal Covenant

According to the Lutheran Agenda, the confirmands are addressed in the following manner: "Do you this day, in the presence of God and of this Christian congregation, confirm the solemn covenant which at your Baptism you made with the Triune God?"¹⁵ As far as the essayist can tell, there is no Scriptural basis at all for confirming the baptismal covenant. The covenant made at Baptism is a one-sided covenant in which God unilaterally conveys the forgiveness of sins which has already been won for all men on the cross of Calvary. God confirms that covenant everytime the gospel is preached, the absolution is announced, the Lord's Supper is celebrated, or people are reminded of their baptism. We on our part remain under that covenant of grace as long as we believe we have what it provides, the free forgiveness of all sin.

The idea of a bilateral covenant which is confirmed by us at the time of confirmation comes unquestionably from the period of Pietism. As was mentioned earlier, the value of Baptism from a pietistic standpoint lay not in its regenerative power but in its covenant which the Christian needed to renew regularly. While it is certainly true that as Christians our sinful nature was crucified with Christ in our Baptism so that we

¹⁴Synodical Conference, The Lutheran Agenda, pg. 22.

¹⁵Ibid, pg. 24.

now live our lives to God, it is also true that, in the words of a German theologian, in the *huper* (substitute) is found the reason for the *sun* (together). In other words, the death of our sinful nature and the resurrection of our new man must always flow out of the death which Christ died as our substitute and the resurrection which he experienced as our firstfruits.

The Confession of Faith

According to the Lutheran Agenda the confirmands are required to confess their faith in the presence of the congregation by reciting the three articles of the Apostles Creed and by acknowledging that they hold all the canonical books of the Bible to be the inspired Word of God, and that the doctrine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, drawn from the Bible, as they have learned to know it from Luther's Small Catechism, is the true and correct one.¹⁶ Confession of faith has a clear Scriptural basis. Jesus himself says, "Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven." Yet such confession is not something that is done only once on a special occasion but something which is done in word and deed repeatedly throughout one's life, in fact it is something a person ought to be ready to do at any given moment in his life.

Membership in the Church

According to the Lutheran Agenda the confirmands are required to answer the question, "Do you desire to be a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and of this congregation?"¹⁷ The idea of being accepted into membership through confirmation is foreign to the Scriptures. We become children of God and members of his true church through our baptism. The idea of becoming a member of the church seems to have had its origin in the hierarchical type of confirmation which was practiced at the time of the Reformation and was inaugurated by Johann Bucer. It is interesting to note that one of the reasons Bucer added this to confirmation was because of the criticism he had been experiencing at the hands of the Anabaptists and Schwenkfeldians over the subject of infant baptism. It should come as no surprise that the period of Pietism strengthened this aspect of confirmation.

The Vows

There are two vows which the confirmands are required to take according to the Lutheran Agenda. The first is a promise to, as a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, continue steadfast in the confession of this Church, and suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it. Obviously this is not a requirement of the Scriptures since the Bible says nothing about the Evangelical Lutheran Church. The obvious source is the period of Orthodoxy, during which time this kind of a vow had its initiation when, as was mentioned earlier, Frederick August II, elector of Saxony, defected to Catholicism. The second vow is a promise to faithfully conform all of ones life to the rule of the divine Word, to be diligent in the use of the means of grace, to walk as it becometh the Gospel of Christ, and in faith, word, and deed to remain true to the Triune God, even unto death. The important thing to remember in this respect is that the vows or promises that we make to God come always and only as a response to God's grace and the covenant he has already made with us. Furthermore these vows, or any vow for that matter, are voluntary responses produced by the Holy Ghost. There are examples of God's children making vows to their God in the Bible but to the knowledge of the essayist they are not mandated. Someone once said that the confirmation vows are promises that really ought to be made every day by every Christian even as they are vows which are broken in one respect or another every day by every Christian. Hence the need for daily contrition and repentance.

¹⁶Ibid, pg. 23.

¹⁷Ibid, pg. 23.

The Laying on of Hands

According to the Lutheran Agenda the minister is to lay his hands on each communicant separately, pray a brief prayer using the confirmand's name, and quote a Scripture passage as a memorial of Confirmation.¹⁸ There is again no Scriptural basis for the laying on of hands. However there are a number of examples of this practice in the Bible. It was also practiced in the early church and became very important when confirmation began to be regarded as a sacrament in that it was said to impart the Holy Spirit. As was mentioned earlier, the practice probably also stems from the sacramental type of confirmation which was practiced at the time of the Reformation. If it is practiced with the idea that it symbolizes nothing more than prayer over a particular individual, it is an adiaphoron. If it carries with it the idea that it is a sacrament by which God confers the Holy Spirit or any other blessing it is unwarranted since it has no specific promise of God. The use of a Scripture verse, along with many other "frills" very likely have their origin in the period of Rationalism, when confirmation became a firmly entrenched custom.

Conclusion

The essentials with regard to confirmation would seem to be instruction in the fundamental doctrines of Christianity and a brief public examination to ensure the congregation of the confirmands' readiness to partake of the Lord's Supper. These practices have their foundation in the Scriptures. The practices which would be labeled non-essential would be the laying on of hands and Scripture passage, the confession of faith, and the vows. If used it must be clearly understood that the laying on of hands is nothing more than prayer over a person and that the confession of faith and the vows are not meant to be once in a lifetime occurrences but daily occurrences in the life of a Christian only and alone in response to God's unilateral covenant of grace, which holds firm even if the confession and commitment of the confirmands gets a little shakey from time to time. A congregation will have to determine whether or not these non-essentials are beneficial when deciding whether or not to use them. The practice which, from this essayist's point of view, are particularly unwholesome would be the renewal of the baptismal covenant and the membership in the congregation. Both seem to detract from the true purpose, power, and meaning of Baptism. The idea of renewing a covenant leads a person to stake his salvation on his covenant with God rather than on God's covenant with him, not a particularly firm foundation at times when the conscience is troubled. Only the baptismal covenant can give real comfort and assurance. The idea of becoming a member of the church at confirmation denies the fact that such membership actually began at baptism.

A couple of closing comments are in order. First of all, perhaps an approach to the problem of slow or no growth in the Word beyond confirmation instructions could be addressed not by expanding the confirmation curriculum but rather by a well planned and well organized Sunday School which extends from the very tiny (age 3) to the very old (age 60 and above) and which is graded and allows for growth. Secondly, perhaps it is not advisable at the present time to tamper with our present practice in the well established congregations where traditions are firmly rooted and consciences are weak. But mission congregations would seem to be ideal testing grounds for new and better practices not only in confirmation but also in Christian education in general. Thirdly, it struck the essayist a little strange to see history and tradition as sources for confirmation without also including contemporary sources. Should not the times and the society in which we live also color to a certain extent what we practice and the way we practice it? Finally, God help us to follow his Word without question in all matters clearly revealed in it and to use true Godly wisdom over against those things which he has neither commanded nor forbidden.

Soli Deo Gloria!!!

¹⁸Ibid, pg. 24.

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