

A Brief Study of Confirmation: Historical Development, Theological Considerations, and Practical Implications

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What is confirmation? How do we define it? What is its purpose? Whom do we confirm? When do we confirm? What are the historical roots of this traditional rite?

Most major denominations have been struggling with these questions over the last several decades. Often they have been moved to study confirmation out of ecumenical concerns.² Since various denominations and branches of Christianity understand and practice confirmation in widely differing ways, ecumenical dialogs have forced participants to study the rite of confirmation and to explain why they do what they do.

Lutherans have recognized a need to rethink their practices because of “shrinking numbers, distorted visions, shallow depth, (and) many disappointments.”³ At least one writer has seen enough problems associated with the traditional practice of confirmation and encountered enough resistance to changing it that he has called Lutheran confirmation a “sacred cow.”⁴ Two pastors writing in a recent edition of *Currents in Theology and Mission* claim that it is time to perform radical surgery on Lutheran confirmation.

Obligating youth to a comparatively short period of study followed by an ecclesiastical rite of passage lacking in theological foundation is not only inconsistent with our understanding of and response to baptism, but also contradictory.

It is past time to abandon the current confused practice referred to as “confirmation.” We do more harm than good. By allowing this historical mutation to remain untested, we facilitate its insidious growth. Generations of Lutherans have attempted and are attempting to address adult questions with adolescent answers all because we perpetuate the myth that their educational process has been completed. It is too late for preventative medicine, we need radical surgery.⁵

Although there have not been such radical calls for the abolition of confirmation in our Wisconsin Synod, our practice has come under study for some important reasons. Many of our laity see confirmation as the end of all formal Bible study. Pastors and congregational leaders are concerned because so many of our high school and college age youth seem to be drifting away from church. The busy pace of modern life makes it difficult to keep in touch with young people once they are confirmed. Too many activities are competing for the time of our youth. Family life today is less structured and parents often seem to be less involved in the religious education of their children. What can we do to solve these problems? How do these problems relate to our confirmation practice? Is it time for a change?

This study will not attempt to answer those questions directly, but will try to give an historical and theological framework within which to discuss them.

I. Historical Development

¹ This paper was prepared for the Commission on Youth Discipleship and is endorsed by this commission.

² Robert L. Browning & Roy A. Reed, *Models of Confirmation and Baptismal Affirmation*. (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1995), p 95.

³ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴ Leslie G. Svendsen, “A Pastor’s Perspective on Confirmation.” *Word & World*, vol. XI, #4 (Fall 1991), p 350.

⁵ Stephen Goodwin & Lewis Groce, “What Are We Confirming?” *Currents in Theology and Mission*. Vol. 22, #3 (June 1995), p 209.

What is confirmation? It is not easy for us to define because Lutherans have practiced and understood confirmation in a variety of ways over the centuries. In fact, Missouri Synod scholar Arthur Repp claims to discern no fewer than six types of confirmation within the Lutheran church:

1. *Catechetical*—instruction for the Lord’s Supper;
2. *Hierarchical*—confession of faith indicating surrender to Christ and submission to the church;
3. *Sacramental*—implication that the Holy Spirit is given in the laying on of hands and a stress that confirmation confers a new or fuller church membership;
4. *Traditional*—public confession of faith by children who have been instructed; confirmation linked to baptism and not the Lord’s Supper;
5. *Pietistic*—renewal of the baptismal covenant with emphasis on conversion experience and regeneration;
6. *Rationalistic*—a coming of age celebration with emphasis on examination, ceremony, and sentimentalism.⁶

The first four types of confirmation can be seen in the sixteenth century. The other two appeared in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These six basic types of confirmation have also tended to appear in various combinations, particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The subject of confirmation is even more complicated when we consider the rite and practice in the Christian Church at large. Some have identified as many as eight different models of confirmation within the various branches of Christianity:

1. The sealing of the Holy Spirit.
2. The completion of infant baptism.
3. The ratification of a person’s baptism.
4. The affirmation of the baptismal covenant in adolescence or as a renewal of covenant at any time during life’s pilgrimage when an individual comes to new or deepened understandings and/or commitments in faith.
5. The blessing, following baptism, welcoming the new Christian into full communion in the church and at the Lord’s table.
6. The separate sacrament which imparts the Holy Spirit and imprints a uniquely Christian character in terms of one’s identity and eternal salvation.
7. The repeatable sacrament, first experienced in the unified initiation through baptism, laying on of hands, and Eucharist, for infants or adults.
8. The rite which symbolizes and celebrates “life in the Spirit,” but is not itself a particular giving or receiving of the Holy Spirit.⁷

Why is there such a variety in the understanding and practice of confirmation? Confirmation is not a biblically mandated practice. It is an ecclesiastical rite. It is an historic development. We need to look at history to see confirmation’s origins and subsequent development to gain an understanding of the wide variety of practices which have developed. A look at history will also help us understand our own practice. A complete history of confirmation cannot be attempted because of time constraints, but we will give a general overview of the development of confirmation through the various periods of church history, allowing the voices of the past to speak for themselves whenever possible.

⁶ Arthur C. Repp, *Confirmation in the Lutheran Church*. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), p 21-55, 64-68.

⁷ Browning & Reed, *op. cit.*, p 12-13.

Confirmation in the First Five Centuries

There is no evidence for anything like the later practice of confirmation in apostolic times. The earliest historical witnesses to practices in post-apostolic times also know nothing of any ceremony resembling a rite of confirmation. Baptism was the sacrament of initiation. *The Didache* (dated from the mid first to the early second century) prescribed a very simple ceremony for baptism without any indication of anything resembling confirmation.

Regarding baptism. Baptize as follows: after first explaining all these points, baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, in running water. But if you have no running water, baptize in other water; and if you cannot in cold, then in warm. But if you have neither, pour water on the head three times in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Before the baptism, let the baptizer and the candidate for baptism fast, as well as any others that are able. Require the candidate to fast one or two days previously.⁸

In the course of time more elaborate ceremonies developed. Two practices soon became a part of the baptismal rite, the laying on of hands and the anointing with oil after baptism. A lengthy period of catechetical instruction began to be required for those contemplating baptism. These practices (the catechumenate, the laying on of hands and anointing with oil) provide the seeds for what might be considered the two most basic types of confirmation: sacramental and catechetical

Hippolytus (c. 170-c. 236) in his *Apostolic Traditions* described the catechetical and baptismal practices of his day and offered this advice, “Let the catechumens spend three years as hearers of the word. But if a man is zealous and perseveres well in the work, it is not the time but his character that is decisive.”⁹ He gave these directions for chrismation and laying on of hands or signing following baptism.

Then the bishop, laying his hand upon them, shall pray....Then, pouring the oil of thanksgiving from his hand and putting it on his forehead, he shall say, I anoint thee with holy oil in the Lord, the Father Almighty and Christ Jesus and [the] Holy Ghost. And signing them on the forehead he shall say: The Lord be with thee; and he who is signed shall say: And with Thy spirit.¹⁰

Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 315-86) taught that the chrismation or anointing with oil symbolized the Holy Spirit descending upon the newly baptized as the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus after his baptism.¹¹ Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444) taught that the chrismation signified the “perfecting” of those who have been justified in baptism.¹² By the end of the fifth century the anointing with oil following baptism was seen as completing baptism and imparting the Holy Spirit. Pseudo-Dionysius (c. 500 AD) wrote “The most divine consecration with ointment completes the perfecting gift and grace of the divine birth....Furthermore in being initiated in that sacred sacrament of divine birth, the perfecting anointing of the ointment gives us a visitation of the divine Spirit.”¹³

⁸ *The Didache*. 7. *Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation*, vol. 6, translated by James A. Kleist. (New York: Newman Press, 1948), p 19.

⁹ *Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus*. trans. by Burton Scott Easton, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1934—Archon Books Reprint, 1962), part II, 17, p 43.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, part II, 22, p 47-48.

¹¹ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), p 433.

¹² *Ibid.*, p 435.

¹³ Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, ch 4, III, 10-11. *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*. Trans. by Colm Luibheid, notes & transl collaboration by Paul Rorem. (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), p 231.

In the West the post-baptismal ceremony of laying on of hands began to be separated from baptism and chrismation as the church grew and moved into rural areas and as infant baptisms increased.¹⁴ The actual term *confirmation* seems to have been used first by two French Councils, Riez in 439 and Orange in 441. These councils used the term for the ceremony of laying on of hands after the baptism. They stated that the local priests had the right to baptize and to anoint with oil following baptism, but the bishops were directed to visit the parishes and *confirm* the baptisms. Around 460 Bishop Faustus of Riez preached a Pentecost sermon on episcopal confirmation which claimed that it made its recipients more fully Christian. Confirmation, he said, gave added strength for battling the devil, the world, and the flesh. This sermon became quite influential in the development of the Western rite.¹⁵

Confirmation in the Middle Ages

During the Middle Ages theologians began to refer to confirmation as a second sacrament. In his *Summa Theologiae* Thomas Aquinas gave classic theological expression to what would become official Roman Catholic teaching.

As was said above, character is a spiritual power ordered to certain sacred actions. We also said that as baptism is a spiritual generation into Christian life, so confirmation is spiritual growth bringing man to spiritual maturity. But it is clear that, from a comparison with bodily life, the activity of a man newly born is different from that which is proper to him when he reaches maturity. So through the sacrament of confirmation a man is given spiritual power for activity that is different from that for which the power is given in baptism. For in baptism power is received for performing those things which pertain to one's own salvation in so far as one lives for himself. In confirmation a person receives power for engaging in the spiritual battle against the enemies of the faith. This is clear from the example of the apostles who, before they received the fullness of the Holy Spirit, were *in the upper room persevering in prayer*; afterwards they went out boldly to confess the faith openly, even in the midst of enemies of the Christian faith. Thus it is manifest that a character is imprinted in the sacrament of confirmation.¹⁶

Aquinas reasoned that confirmation had to be performed by a bishop (a more *dignified* minister than a priest) because it involved spiritual growth from the imperfect to the perfect.

The sacrament of baptism is more effective than confirmation with respect to the removal of evil, because it is a spiritual generation which is change from non-being to being. But confirmation is more effective with regard to progress in good, because it involves spiritual growth from imperfect to perfect being. Therefore confirmation is committed to a more dignified minister.¹⁷

When the Council of Florence (1439) made confirmation an official sacrament of the Catholic Church, it was merely recognizing what was already generally taught.¹⁸

Confirmation in the Reformation Period & Age of Orthodoxy

¹⁴ Repp, op. cit., 14.

¹⁵ Browning & Reed, *Ibid.*, p 9-10.

¹⁶ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 3a. 72, 5. Trans. by James J. Cunningham (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975), vol. 57, p 205.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3a, 72, 11; vol. 57, p 225.

¹⁸ Repp, *Ibid.*, p 15.

Luther was strongly opposed to the Roman Catholic understanding of confirmation as a sacrament. He suggested that it was “invented to adorn the office of bishops, that they may not be entirely without work in the church.”¹⁹ He rejected confirmation as a sacrament because he could find no word of divine promise connected to it.

But instead of this we seek sacraments that have been divinely instituted, and among these we see no reason for numbering confirmation. For to constitute a sacrament there must be above all things else a word of divine promise, by which faith may be exercised. But we read nowhere that Christ ever gave a promise concerning confirmation, although he laid hands on many and included the laying on of hands among the signs in the last chapter of Mark [16:18]: “They will lay their hands on the sick; and they will recover.” Yet no one applied this to a sacrament, for that is not possible.²⁰

Although Luther rejected confirmation as a sacrament, he was not opposed to having a rite of confirmation if it was stripped of its objectionable features. In a sermon on marriage published in 1522 he declared, “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. They mock our God when they say that it is one of God’s sacraments, for it is a purely human contrivance.”²¹ In another sermon he explained, “Confirmation should not be observed as the bishops desire it. Nevertheless we do not find fault if every pastor examines the faith of the children to see whether it is good and sincere, lays hands on them, and confirms them.”²² Luther did not object to Bugenhagen’s Brandenburg Church Order (1540) which included an evangelical type of confirmation nor did he object to Melancthon’s Wittenberg Reformation (1545) which also suggested an evangelical confirmation.²³ Luther was always more concerned about instruction in God’s Word and the sacraments than he was about any particular rite or ceremony.

Melancthon (1497-1560) in the *Apology* joined Luther in rejecting confirmation as a sacrament because there was no scriptural command instituting it nor a gospel promise attached to it. “*Confirmation and Extreme Unction* are rites received from the Fathers which not even the Church requires as necessary to salvation, because they do not have God’s command. Therefore it is not useless to distinguish these rites from the former, which have God’s express command and a clear promise of grace.”²⁴

Lutheran practice included instruction and examination of communicants prior to partaking of the Lord’s Supper. The *Apology* states, “With us many use the Lord’s Supper [willingly and without constraint] every Lord’s Day, but after having been first instructed, examined [whether they know and understand anything of the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments], and absolved.”²⁵ Luther’s emphasis on Christian education is well known. He intended his catechisms to be used in the home as parents carried out their responsibility of training their children. Luther’s co-workers expected that this would be done and that even young children would receive enough instruction to partake of the Lord’s Supper. As Bente explains in his historical introduction to the *Concordia Triglotta*:

The Large Catechism was to serve all; the same applies to the Small Catechism. But above all it was to be placed into the hands of the children, who were to use and to memorize it at home, and bring it with them for instruction in the church....Luther was accustomed to direct his admonition

¹⁹ Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. LW (American Edition), vol. 36, p 91.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p 92.

²¹ LW, vol. 45, p 25.

²² *Sermon for Laetare Afternoon*, March 15, 1523, cited in Repp, *op. cit.*, p 17.

²³ Repp, *Ibid.*, p 17-18.

²⁴ Ap XIII, 6.

²⁵ Ap XV, 40 (cf. both the Latin & German versions).

to partake of the Lord's Supper diligently also to children, and that, too, to children of comparatively tender years. In his sermon of March 25, 1529, he says, "This exhortation ought not only move us older ones, but also the young and the children. Therefore you parents ought to instruct and educate them in the Decalog, the Creed, the Prayer, and the Sacraments. Such children ought to be admitted to the Table that they might be partakers" [of the Lord's Supper] (W. 30, 1, 233). In his sermon of December 10, 1528, we read: "Hence, you parents and heads of families, invite your subordinates to this Sacrament; and we shall demand an account of you if you neglect it. If you will not go yourselves, let the young go; we are much concerned about them. When they come, we shall learn, by examining them, how you instruct them in the Word as prescribed. Hence, do come more frequently to the Sacrament, and also admonish your children to do so when they have reached the age of discretion. For in this way we want to learn who are Christians and who not. If you will not do so, we shall speak to you on the subject. For even though you older people insist on going to the devil, we shall still inquire about your children. Necessity: because sin, the devil, and death are ever present. Benefit: because the remission of sins and the Holy Spirit are received." (121 f). The tender age at which the young were held to partake of the Lord's Supper appears in Bugenhagen's preface to his Danish edition of the *Enchiridion* of 1538, where he says, "that, after this confession is made, also the little children of about eight years or less should be admitted to the table of him who says: Suffer the little children to come unto Me."²⁶

John Calvin (1509-64) was also opposed to the Catholic sacrament of confirmation because it lacked divine institution. He advocated a catechetical model which included a public examination and confession of faith. He suggested the age often as an appropriate age for such a rite.

I sincerely wish that we retained the custom, which I have stated was practiced among the ancients before this abortive image of a sacrament made its appearance. For it was not such a confirmation as the Romanists pretend, which cannot be mentioned without injury to baptism; but a catechetical exercise, in which children or youth used to deliver an account of their faith in the presence of the Church. Now, it would be the best made of catechetical instruction, if a formulary were written for this purpose, containing and stating, in a familiar manner, all the articles of our religion, in which the universal Church of believers ought to agree, without any controversy: a boy of ten years of age might present himself to make a confession of his faith, he might be questioned on all the articles, and might give suitable answers: if he were ignorant of any or did not fully understand them, he should be taught. Thus the Church would witness his profession of the only true and pure faith, in which all the community of believers unanimously worship the one God. If this discipline were observed in the present day, it would certainly sharpen the inactivity of some parents, who carelessly neglect the instruction of their children as a thing in which they have no concern, but which, in that case, they could not omit without public disgrace; there would be more harmony of faith among Christian people, nor would many betray such great ignorance and want of information; some would not be so easily carried away with novel and strange tenets; in short, all would have a regular acquaintance with Christian doctrine.²⁷

The Reformed churches in Europe following Calvin tended to retain confirmation with a strong emphasis on instruction at home, in school and church, while being careful not to give any impression that their

²⁶ *Concordia Triglotta*. Historical introduction by F. Berte, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921) p 82.

²⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*. Book 4, ch XIX, par XIII. Trans. by John Allen, (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Christian Education, 1936), vol. II, p 743-744.

practice was Roman Catholicism in disguise, English Puritans tended to emphasize thorough instruction and encouraged the personal experience of the individual. Disliking fixed forms and anything that smacked of papalism, they substituted a ceremony of admission to church membership in place of confirmation. They based their rite on acceptance of a local covenant.²⁸

Martin Bucer (1491-1551) perhaps had as much influence on the development of confirmation among Protestants as anyone in the sixteenth century. Bucer was concerned with Christian discipline. He emphasized “surrender to Christ” and “commitment to the church.” His proposals for a public confirmation for baptized adolescents after they had been instructed in the faith came in response to Anabaptist demands for public profession of faith and surrender to Christ.²⁹ He wanted to preserve an emphasis on infant baptism while maintaining that those who were baptized must make a public profession of faith and obedience. In principle such a profession was to be voluntary, but in practice it was expected if a person wished to be considered a Christian. “Bucer was unable to resolve the inherent conflict between the idea of a church constituted on the basis of infant baptism and that of a church comprised only of those who had made a public profession of faith and obedience.”³⁰

Bucer’s influence stems from the confirmation ceremony he drew up for Landgrave Philip of Hesse in 1539. This served as a model for other Lutheran territories (including Wuerttemberg, the home of many WELS forebearers).³¹ The influence of this ceremony has earned Bucer the title of “father of evangelical confirmation.”³²

Rome reacted strongly to the Reformation rejection of confirmation as a sacrament. In the seventh session of the Council of Trent (1545-63) the assembled prelates condemned the catechetical understanding of confirmation in the strongest of terms and insisted that only bishops could perform the rite.

Can. 1. If anyone says that the confirmation of those baptized is an empty ceremony and not a true and proper sacrament; or that of old it was nothing more than a sort of instruction, whereby those approaching adolescence gave an account of their faith to the Church, let him be anathema.

Can. 2. If anyone says that those who ascribe any power to the holy chrism of confirmation, offers insults to the Holy Ghost, let him be anathema.

Can. 3. If anyone says that the ordinary minister of holy confirmation is not the bishop alone, but any simple priest, let him be anathema.³³

Martin Chemnitz’s (1522-86) masterful examination and refutation of Trent’s pronouncements on confirmation includes his own suggestions for a God-pleasing rite. He emphasized catechetical instruction, public profession of faith, exhortation, and the prayers of the church for the confirmand. He linked confirmation to baptism rather than the Lord’s Supper.

Our theologians have often shown that if traditions that are useless, superstitious and in conflict with Scripture are removed, the rite of confirmation can be used in godly fashion and for the edification of the church, namely in this way, that those who were baptized in infancy (for that is now the condition of the church) would, when they have arrived at the years of discretion, be diligently instructed in the sure and simple teaching of the church’s doctrine and, when it is evident that the elements of the doctrine have been sufficiently grasped, be brought afterward to

²⁸ *Confirmation: History, Doctrine, and Practice*. Edited by Kenig Burbaker Cully (Greenwich, CT: The Seabury Press, 1962), p 40.

²⁹ Amy Nelson Burnett, “Confirmation and Christian Fellowship: Martin Bucer on Commitment to the Church.” *Church History*, vol. 64, #2 (June 1995), p 203-4.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 216.

³¹ Amy Nelson Burnett, “Martin Bucer and the Anabaptist Context of Evangelical Confirmation.” *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, vol. LXVIII, #1 (January 1994), p 122.

³² *Ibid.*, p 95.

³³ *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*. Trans. by H. J. Schroeder. (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1941), p 54-55.

the bishop and the church. There the child who was baptized in infancy would by a brief and simple admonition be reminded of his Baptism, namely that he was baptized, how, why, and into what he was baptized, what in this Baptism the whole Trinity conferred upon and seated to him, namely the covenant of peace and the compact of grace, how there Satan was renounced and a profession of faith and a promise of obedience made.

Second, the child himself would give his own public profession of this doctrine and faith.

Third, he would be questioned concerning the chief parts of the Christian religion and would respond with respect to each of them or, if he should show lack of understanding in some part, he would be better instructed.

Fourth, he would be reminded and would show by his confession that he disagrees with all heathenish, heretical, fanatical, and ungodly opinions.

Fifth, there would be added an earnest and serious exhortation from the Word of God that he should persevere in his baptismal covenant and in this doctrine and faith and, by making progress in the same, might thereafter be firmly established.

Sixth, public prayer would be made for these children that God would deign, by his Holy Spirit, to govern, preserve, and strengthen them in this profession. To this prayer there could be added without superstition the laying on of hands. This prayer would not be in vain, for it relies upon the promise concerning the gift of preservation and on God's strengthening grace.

Such a rite of confirmation would surely be very useful for the edification of the young and of the whole church. It would be in harmony with both Scripture and the purer antiquity.³⁴

Chemnitz's opinions helped to legitimize confirmation among Lutherans, but in the sixteenth century there was no uniform practice.³⁵

The practice of confirmation spread during the Age of Orthodoxy, but the majority of churches in Germany and Scandinavia continued to prepare children for the reception of the Lord's Supper through catechetical instruction without any rite. One addition to the rite of confirmation came about because of the conversion of Friedrich August II, Elector of Saxony (1670-1733) to Catholicism. The children of the nobility were asked to make a vow to remain true to the Lutheran Church.³⁶

The advances of the Counter-Reformation, Lutheran defections to the Reformed, and the political and religious turmoil of the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) led to an expansion of the material covered in catechetical instruction. *Luther's Small Catechism* with its succinct summaries of the chief parts of Christian doctrine was augmented by expositions which included rather complete outlines of Christian theology. Children memorized questions and answers through constant repetition. Poor educational methods with little application of scriptural truth to daily life, however, made catechetical instruction rather tedious for many students.³⁷

Confirmation in the Age of Pietism & Rationalism

Philip Jacob Spener (1635-1705), the father of Lutheran Pietism, used Chemnitz's confirmation suggestions in his *Examination of the Council of Trent* to argue that confirmation was a Lutheran practice.³⁸ Spener was influenced by Bucer's rite of confirmation and carried it a step farther. He turned confirmation among Lutherans into a decidedly subjective practice. He emphasized the renewal of the baptismal covenant

³⁴ Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*. Trans. by Fred Kramer. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978), vol. II, p 212.

³⁵ *Confirmation: A Study Document*. Prepared by the Commission on Education of the Lutheran World Federation, trans. by Walter G. Tillmanns, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1963). p 26-27.

³⁶ Repp, op. cit, p 61-64.

³⁷ Gustav K. Wiencke, "Confirmation Instruction in Historical Perspective," *The Lutheran Quarterly*, vol. VII, #2 (May 1955), p 103-104.

³⁸ Philip Jacob Spener, *Theologische Bedencken* (1709). Vol. IV, p 255-260.

and instructed children so that they could make a conscious decision to make a vow to keep this covenant in the future. Spener was interested in the personal surrender of the awakened Christian to Christ.³⁹ August Hermann Francke (1663-1727), Spener's disciple and successor as leader of the movement, joined him in his emphasis on conversion, covenant renewal, and solemn vow. Francke added a subjective element of his own. He allowed the child to make a personal confession of his faith in his own words rather than with a prescribed confession.⁴⁰ This had the practical effect of changing the confirmation confession from an objective statement of Christian truth to a subjective statement of Christian experience. Pietism did much to improve the educational methodology of the day, but subjective conversion experience and sanctification took the place of justification as the chief emphasis of the Lutheran Church's understanding of confirmation.

Although Pietism did make some important contributions to educational methodology and practice, the movement's underlying subjectivism caused problems. The sacraments were denigrated. Because of the emphasis on the personal surrender of the individual to Christ, there was a strong implication that baptism was not really complete until the confirmand made such a personal decision. Some not only implied but also actually taught that confirmation was a necessary complement to baptism which completed the sacrament.⁴¹ Pietism's overemphasis on the worthiness of the individual to partake of the Lord's Supper led to self-centered worry about preparation for the Lord's Supper instead of confidence in the forgiveness which the sacrament offers and conveys.⁴² Since an individual was not only to remember baptism at his confirmation, but also to renew the baptismal covenant and examine himself to determine whether he was truly a Christian, the age for confirmation was raised. Before this time confirmation among the Lutherans who practiced it was generally from ten to twelve; after this time it was age fourteen to sixteen.⁴³

During the Age of Rationalism confirmation became more widely practiced among Lutherans and more festively celebrated with white robes and family dinners. Confirmation at the age of fourteen to sixteen became common practice because of the association with the completion of elementary education. The understanding of confirmation as graduation seems to have its roots in this period. Confirmation meant the entering of the adult world. Since many of the schools in Germany closed around Easter for spring planting, confirmation on Palm Sunday became a common practice. Many began to speak of the confirmation vow in terms of an oath and the rite *assumed a greater importance than baptism*. It seems that the custom of assigning confirmands personal Bible passages also began during this period. By the early nineteenth century the practice of confirmation became almost universal among Lutherans.⁴⁴

Practice of confirmation in America was sporadic. John Wesley omitted the order of confirmation from the Prayer Book that he revised for America. American Puritans had a strong tradition of religious instruction, but saw such instruction as a preparation for conversion, not confirmation. Revivalism in eighteenth and nineteenth century America made conversion experience and personal piety the basis for church membership and tended to disparage doctrine and religious education.⁴⁵

Nineteenth Century Confessional Revival & Twentieth Century Challenges

In the early nineteenth century there was a confessional revival among Lutherans in Germany in reaction to the spiritual emptiness of Rationalism and the forced merger of Lutherans and Reformed in the Prussian Union (1817). Concerned Christians also reacted to state church spirituality in which all citizens were baptized and virtually all were confirmed regardless of inner conviction. Claus Harms (1788-1855) helped spark a confessional revival through his issuance in 1817 of an edition of Luther's *Ninety-five Theses* along

³⁹ *Confirmation: A Study Document*, p 29-30.

⁴⁰ Repp, op. cit., p 72.

⁴¹ Ibid., p 72.

⁴² Frank W. Klos, *Confirmation and First Communion*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1968), p 68-69.

⁴³ Repp, Ibid., p 75.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 76-84; Klos, Ibid., 69-71.

⁴⁵ *Confirmation: History Doctrine and Practice*, p 44-46.

with ninety-five of his own attacking Rationalism and the Prussian Union. Harms also saw a need for reforming the practice of confirmation. He offered this advice:

With respect to the [confirmation] sermon I caution you against six mistakes. 1. Do not speak as though you did it all, the parents and teachers did nothing; 2. To picture the children as holy angels; 3. And the others, the world, as black and thus frighten the children; 4. To overemphasize the vow, to make it an oath; 5. To speak disparagingly about Baptism, as though it were incomplete, needed to be supplemented, had become obsolete, or needed to be renewed; 6. To permit the Christian element to be completely absorbed by the human which, of course, is much more emotional.⁴⁶

In the early decades of the nineteenth century when the revival fires were burning in this country, some Lutherans were also caught up in the spirit of the times. Samuel Simon Schmucker and Benjamin Kurtz were outspoken advocates of the “new measures” associated with the Second Awakening. The new measures often involved a manipulation of emotions and were intended to induce conversion. Since revivals emphasized subjective experience, careful instruction was neglected. Luther’s Catechisms were disparaged. As a respected Lutheran historian notes,

Lutherans did not remain untouched. Considering Lutheran doctrine and practice this was unfortunate. Surely the method of the revivalist is not in harmony with Lutheran teaching.... By artificial means—sensational sermons, enraptured prayers, hysterical songs and stirring appeals—the revival preacher aims to replace the work of the Holy Spirit and to force the new birth. Naturally enough religious instruction lost importance. The Catechism was neglected. People spoke with more or less scorn of head Christians,” “memory Christians,” and “Catechism Christians.” Since many Lutheran congregations took part in these revivals and since Lutheran pastors often acted as revival preachers, the tendency of the movement was toward unionization of the churches. The books of Baxter, Bunyan, Wesley, Edwards, Howe and Dwight replaced Lutheran literature, and created a taste which could be satisfied only when the sermon harmonized with the ideals of Methodism.⁴⁷

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Europe and America Luther’s Catechism continued to form the basis for most instruction for most Lutherans. Some educators tried to improve the instructional methodology of the confirmation classroom. Theologians in Europe continued to wrestle with the problem of nominal membership in the state church and many made proposals to reform the practice of confirmation.⁴⁸

In the twentieth century American denominations which traditionally had a practice of confirmation have had to rethink their practice in the light of declining church membership, secularism, competition with countless activities for time for catechetical instruction, and the falling away of young people during their high school and college years.

Confirmation also became a matter for debate for many Lutherans living under communism in East Germany because of competition with the atheistic “Youth Dedications” of the communist party.⁴⁹ The Commission of Education of the Lutheran World Federation, recognizing the wide variety of understandings, goals, and practices of confirmation among Lutherans around the world, undertook a study in 1957. The

⁴⁶ Quoted by Repp, p 86.

⁴⁷ *A History of Lutheranism in America, 1619-1930*. Edited from *History of the Lutheran Church in America* by J. L. Neve. Revised by Willard D. Allbeck, John M. Drickamer, and C. George Fry. (Ft. Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1979) p. 51.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p 88-93.

⁴⁹ *Confirmation: A Study Document*, p 32.

Commission presented its report to the Federation in Helsinki in 1963. The LWF carried out a second round of study from 1979 through 1986 surveying the practice of member church bodies. Twenty-nine member churches responded from around the world. The study draw a number of conclusions, including the following:

- Confirmation instruction is an integral part of Christian education in Lutheran churches.
- The primary instructor is the pastor.
- The length of intensive confirmation instruction ranges from two weeks in a boarding school or camp program to three years of weekly sessions.
- The age for confirmation ranges from 12 to 25, but normally is 13-15. The lowest ages are in Asia and the highest in the Netherlands and Latin America.
- Only a few churches offer *special* continuing nurture beyond the rite of confirmation.
- In one form or another, Luther's Small Catechism is used in nearly every Lutheran church.
- Almost without exception, confirmation instruction is concluded with a confirmation rite at a worship service.
- In most churches the rite is understood as initiation into full membership into the church, which includes the rite to participate in Holy Communion. Other understandings include a public confirmation of one's "acceptance" of Christ and the baptismal covenant, "graduation" from Sunday school and religious instruction, initiation into adulthood, and a practice to safeguard the church's doctrinal position. In 25% of the churches the right to vote in church elections is conferred in the rite.
- For most Lutheran church bodies in the world the confirmation rite includes official admission to Holy Communion.
- In those churches which practice early communion (prior to confirmation), the recommended age for first communion is 10 in North America, and 5-7 in Europe.
- All churches practicing early communion require basic instruction concerning the meaning of this sacrament.⁵⁰

Confirmation In America Today

The Eastern Orthodox

The Eastern Orthodox have continued the practice of chrismation (confirmation) with oil following baptism. After baptism and chrismation the individual is given the Lord's Supper. This is true whether the individual is an adult or an infant. The oil used in the chrismation must be blessed by a bishop. A priest usually administers it. Chrismation is also administered to Orthodox who return to the church after having apostasized to another faith such as Islam. Converts from Protestantism and Anglicanism are received into Orthodoxy by this rite. Roman Catholics who convert are usually received in this way, but sometimes the rite is omitted. Timothy Ware (Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia) explains the significance of chrismation. He writes:

Immediately after Baptism, an Orthodox child is "chrismated" or "confirmed." The priest takes a special ointment, the Chrism (in Greek, *myron*), and with this he anoints various parts of the child's body, marking them with the sign of the Cross: first the forehead, then the eyes, nostrils, mouth, and ears, the breast, the hands, and the feet. As he marks each child he says, "The seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit." The child who has been incorporated into Christ at Baptism now receives in Chrismation the gift of the Spirit, thereby becoming a *laikos* (layperson), a full

⁵⁰ Dale Griffin. "Recent Developments in Continuation Practices." (CPH Library, available from WELS Commission of Youth Discipleship), p 2-3.

member of the people (*laos*) of God. Chrismation is an extension of Pentecost: the same Spirit who descended on the Apostles visibly in tongues of fire now descends on the newly baptized invisibly, but with no less reality and power. Through Chrismation every member of the Church becomes a prophet, and receives a share in the royal priesthood of Christ, all Christians alike, because they are chrismated, are called to act as conscious witnesses to the Truth. “You have an anointing (*chrisma*) from the holy One, and know all things” (I John ii,20).⁵¹

Roman Catholics

Rome’s understanding of confirmation remains basically the same as in the late Middle Ages and at the Council of Trent. Catholicism still teaches that under ordinary circumstance the “sacrament” must be administered by a bishop, but today it also lays special emphasis on the catechetical preparation for confirmation “to awaken a sense of belonging to the Church of Jesus Christ, the universal Church as well as the parish community.”⁵² Rome teaches:

Confirmation perfects Baptismal grace; it is the sacrament which gives the Holy Spirit in order to root us more deeply in divine filiation, incorporate us more firmly into Christ, strengthen our bond with the Church, associate us more closely with her mission, and help us bear witness to the Christian faith in words accompanied by deeds.

Confirmation, like Baptism, imprints a spiritual mark or indelible character on the Christian’s soul; for this reason one can receive this sacrament only once in one’s life.⁵³

Mainline Protestantism

Among the Reformed today there is a variety of confirmation rites and practices. For most “confirmation basically marks the time when a person is received into more responsible membership; and it stands for a period of preparations which gives strength for a more mature Christian life.”⁵⁴ Because Wesley did not include a rite for confirmation, the practice of confirmation is a more recent development for Methodists. The United Methodist hymnal of 1964 included a rite of confirmation, but the denomination seems to be replacing the term confirmation with the expression “public profession of baptismal faith.” The rite is seen as the first of several affirmations of a person’s baptism.⁵⁵

Mainline denominations in general are in the process of studying and modifying confirmation practice. A recent study claims to see a number of trends developing:

- The so-called “unified initiation,” i.e., initiation as baptism/hand laying/anointing/Eucharist is a feature of tradition and current discussion which is widely understood if not practiced.
- Renewal of baptism, confirmation, or baptismal affirmation as repeatable experiences are becoming more common as liturgical/spiritual actions in the churches.
- There is widespread general agreement that affirmation of baptism or confirmation should take place in late adolescence or even early adulthood rather than in early adolescence.
- Service has become one of the strong ways of presenting the theme of mission (to involve the catechumen in the life of the church).

⁵¹ Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*. (London: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1993), p 278-279.

⁵² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. (New York: Image Books [Doubleday], 1994), #1309 p 365.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, #1316-1317, p 367.

⁵⁴ Dean K. Thompson, “Confirmation,” *Reformed Liturgy & Music*. Vol. XXI, #2 (Spring 1987), p 123.

⁵⁵ Browning and Reed, *Ibid.*, p 87-88.

- The conviction that the Eucharist should be withheld until confirmation is apparently a failed idea.
- While pastors are still the central teachers, many confirmation teaching teams are emerging.
- The use of adult mentors is increasingly evident.⁵⁶

The ELCA and LCMS

In 1964 the LCA, ALC, and LCMS established a Joint Committee on the Theology and Practice of Confirmation. In 1969 the Commission presented a report to be considered by the various synods. The Report offered this definition of confirmation: “Confirmation is a pastoral and educational ministry of the church that is designed to help baptized children identify with the life and mission of the adult Christian community and that is celebrated in a public rite.”⁵⁷ The commission unanimously recommended:

that first communion and confirmation be separated as two distinct acts. This separation will allow children to partake of the Lord’s Supper at an earlier age and then permit the church to carry on its pastoral and educational ministry through confirmation instruction at a time when Christian children are more mature.⁵⁸

The Commission recommended fifth grade for first communion and tenth grade for confirmation.⁵⁹ The Commission also made the following suggestions for the rite of confirmation (summary mine):

1. No impression should be given that confirmation completes or supplements baptism.
2. No formal vow is necessary. The confirmand is simply to assert or affirm, in his declaration of faith, his personal acceptance of God’s acts of grace and his resultant personal intent to express that grace in a Christian life.
3. The blessing is the spoken Word and intercessory prayer on behalf of the one who stands in the full and complete faith already received in Baptism.
4. The laying on of hands personalizes the prayers of the congregation as they intercede for the confirmands in prayer and petition God to impart the gifts of his Holy Spirit.
5. If the rite attests that the confirmand now may assume certain privileges and responsibilities in its organizational structure, it must be clearly stated lest the impression is given that he is receiving through confirmation what he already has by virtue of his baptism.
6. No statement should be made that the confirmand is now a “member of the church” or entering into “full communion” with the church.⁶⁰

The ALC, LCA, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada accepted the recommendations. The LCMS in 1971 refused to adopt a stand, but left it up to individual congregations to continue to study and establish a local practice.⁶¹

Today in the ELCA there is a trend to replace the term confirmation with “affirmation of baptism.” Children of various ages may be invited to the Lord’s Supper with the responsibility for that decision shared by

⁵⁶ Ibid., p 101-107.

⁵⁷ “A Report for Study from the Joint Commission on the Theology and Practice of Confirmation.” In *Confirmation and Education*, edited by W. Kent Gilbert, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), p 183.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p 202.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p 207-212.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p 217-219.

⁶¹ Griffin, Ibid., p 9.

the pastor, parents, child, family sponsors, and the congregation. Confirmation programs now emphasize adult mentors and sponsors as well as more parental participation.⁶²

The LCMS hymnal *Lutheran Worship* has an order for confirmation. The order asks the confirmands this question: “Do you desire to become a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and of this congregation?” After all the catechumens have answered several questions and received the blessing, the minister declares:

Upon this your profession and promise I invite and welcome you, as members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and of this congregation, to share with us in all the gifts our Lord has for his Church and to live them out continually in his worship and service.⁶³

The wording leaves the impression that these young people were not members of the church by virtue of their baptism, but have now become members by virtue of their confirmation. The LCMS Commission on Worship warns that these statements must be carefully explained so that they are not misunderstood.⁶⁴

Lutheran Worship: Altar Book offers this definition of confirmation:

Confirmation is a public rite of the Church that is preceded by a period of instruction designed to help baptized Christians identify with the life and mission of the Christian community. Having been instructed in the Christian faith prior to admission to the Lord’s Supper (1 Corinthians 11:28), the rite of Confirmation provides an opportunity for the individual Christian, relying on God’s promise of Holy Baptism, to make a personal public confession of faith and a lifelong pledge of fidelity to Christ.⁶⁵

WELS

Our Wisconsin Synod practice was brought from Germany by our forefathers and developed in association with the other members of the Synodical Conference. The rite authorized by the Synodical Conference in the 1940s spoke of *confirming* the baptismal covenant and included a confession of faith and a pledge or promise to remain faithful to the teachings of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.

Dearly Beloved: When you were little children, you were received into God’s covenant of grace in Holy Baptism. And now, having learned the meaning of this covenant from instruction in the Word of God, you are gathered here before God and this congregation publicly to make profession of your faith in the Triune God and to confirm your covenant with him, to dedicate yourselves body and soul for time and eternity to your God and Lord. (Others of you are to make this public confession and promise and then, in obedience to Christ’s command, to receive the Sacrament of Holy Baptism).⁶⁶

The Gausewitz Catechism spoke of confirmation in three places. The rite was explained as a renewal of the baptismal promise or vow, and public confession of faith after proper instruction and reception into the communicant membership of the congregation.

367. *When is the baptismal promise of children renewed publicly?*

⁶² Browning and Reed, *Ibid.*, p 20, 85.

⁶³ *Lutheran Worship*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1982), p 206-207.

⁶⁴ Donald L. Deffner, “Confirmation.” *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, edited by Fred L. Precht, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1993), p 396, 398.

⁶⁵ Quoted by Deffner, *Ibid.*, p 387.

⁶⁶ *The Pastor’s Companion*. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House), p 23.

The baptismal promise of children is renewed publicly when they are confirmed after proper instruction.

396. What practice is, therefore, observed among us?

Christians, before being admitted to the Lord's Supper, are instructed in the principal truths of Christian doctrine and make public confession of their faith in Christ. (Confirmation.)

416. Who should not be admitted to the Lord's Supper?

Those who have not been instructed in the truth* and hence cannot "remember" the Lord's death. *Such instruction is given before confirmation. The confirmation rite following such instruction is the fine church custom in which the baptized person publicly renews his baptismal vow, confesses his faith, pledges allegiance to the Lord, and is received into the communicant membership of the congregation.⁶⁷

The Kuske catechism links confirmation to instruction in preparation for proper reception for the Lord's Supper. Kuske makes no mention of confirmation in the context of baptism or remembering one's baptism.

301. To whom does God want us to give Holy Communion?

b. God wants us to give Holy Communion only to those who are instructed so that they know the meaning of Christ's death. (Confirmation instruction)⁶⁸

Confirmation: A ceremony following instruction in which Christians confess their faith and are acknowledged as sufficiently instructed to receive Holy Communion.⁶⁹

Our seminary's pastoral theology text offers a similar definition of confirmation and gives specific rationale for its definition.

Confirmation is a church rite in which a congregation gives its catechumens who have been instructed in Christian doctrine according to the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions an opportunity to confess their faith before the church, prays for the children with the laying on of hands, and invites them as such who have sufficient spiritual maturity to participate in the Lord's Supper.

This definition draws attention to the following significant points: 1. The instruction of the children, 2. The opportunity for a public confession of their faith, 3. The prayer of the congregation in their behalf, and 4. The invitation to partake of Holy Communion. This view retains a direct connection between confirmation and the first admission to communion and thus provides a bridge between baptism and Holy Communion.⁷⁰

Confirmation usually takes place near the time of eighth grade graduation after a period of instruction lasting two or three years. The pastor often teaches the class during the entire period or at least during the final year of instruction. Confirmation is usually preceded by a public examination. The custom of having confirmation gowns, etc., varies from congregation to congregation. Many congregations confirm on Palm Sunday; others use Pentecost. Still others select a particular Sunday in May or June. Some confirm adults with the children. Others confirm adults whenever their adult information class is completed. Adult instruction is usually much less extensive (20-25 lessons) than that given to the children.

⁶⁷ *Doctor Martin Luther's Small Catechism: Explained for Children and Adults*. Originally edited by C. Gausewitz, (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1956), p 205, 220, 227.

⁶⁸ David P. Kuske, *Luther's Catechism: The Small Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther and an Exposition for Children and Adults Written in Contemporary English*. (Milwaukee: WELS Board for Parish Education, 1982), p 264.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p 338.

⁷⁰ Armin W. Schuetze & Irwin J. Habeck, *The Shepherd under Christ*. (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1974), p 119.

When our synod embarked on a project to create a unified religion curriculum from pre-school through high school for our congregations and schools, Prof. David Kuske proposed modifying our current confirmation practice.

1. To have a prescribed course for 9th through 12th graders and a rite to mark the completion of this prescribed course.
2. To make a change in the promise made at confirmation and to allow an 18-month window for confirmation at the end of 7th grade to the middle of 9th grade.⁷¹

A cover letter requested that these proposals be studied in circuit meetings or conferences during 1992 or early 1993.

Individual conferences and circuits which studied and responded to the proposals were divided in their reaction to the proposals. Of the thirty-five conferences or circuits which responded to the first proposal by vote, nine said it should be implemented, twelve said it should not be considered, and fourteen responded that it should be implemented differently. Thirty-four conferences and circuits responded to the second proposal. Nine said it should be implemented, fourteen said it should not, nine were of the opinion that it should be implemented differently, and two reported that there was no consensus or that there was a tie vote.⁷² There seems to be general agreement about the need to expand the nurture of high school age youth because of concern over the “graduation syndrome” associated with youth confirmation and distress over the number of high school and college age youth who drift away from the church.

The Ad Hoc Committee on Youth Nurture of the Commission on Youth Discipleship noted five areas of concern or questions raised by the conferences in their responses to Kuske’s proposals: 1) What is meant by a “prescribed course”? 2) teenagers who do not participate; 3) changing the vow and creating a new ceremony at the end of 12th grade; 4) the eighteen-month window for confirmation; 5) parental involvement—trying to do something about youth nurture without addressing the spirituality of parents is fruitless.

The committee offered brief answers to these concerns in a subsequent paper: 1) The term *prescribed course* means a basic course of instruction. 2) Nothing will be gained by legalistically forcing teenagers to participate in a course of study. There is benefit, however, in attempting to establish a tradition of continuing education in our congregations beginning with the teens. 3) The confirmation vow would be a promise to be faithful in the use of the means of grace, which is the only way God can keep us faithful to death. A ceremony for 12th grade students would be optional. 4) The main purpose of having an eighteen-month window for confirmation is to allow those congregations which choose to confirm after seventh grade to initiate the high school curriculum already in eighth grade. This would allow a natural introduction into a continuing Christian education program for high school students. 5) The Board for Parish Education is giving a good deal of attention to preparing materials for parents so that they might be able to develop skills for the spiritual nurturing of their children.⁷³ The Commission recognized the difficulty in proposing any changes in practice without the new curriculum being in place. The Commission plans to present resolutions concerning confirmation and the new coordinated religion curriculum to the 1997 synod convention.⁷⁴

II. Theological Considerations

There Is No Scriptural Basis for Confirmation as a Sacrament

⁷¹ David P. Kuske, “Expanding the Nurture of High School Age Youth.” Sent to each pastor and elementary and high school principal of WELS by the Commission on Youth Discipleship and Commission on Parish Schools, February 1992.

⁷² “Summary of Reactions to Confirmation Proposals,” available from the WELS Commission on Youth Discipleship.

⁷³ “Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Youth Nurture,” Commission on Youth Discipleship, 1994.

⁷⁴ Minutes of the Commission on Youth Discipleship, January 1994.

Rome claims justification for confirmation as a sacrament in two accounts in the book of Acts 8:14-17 & 19:1-6. Catholics claim that these accounts reveal an apostolic practice of the laying on of hands after baptism which granted the gift of the Holy Spirit. The rite was reserved for the Apostles. Today it is reserved for the bishops, the successors of the Apostles.⁷⁵ A careful examination of the two accounts, however, will not find a binding practice instituted or prescribed.

Acts 8:14-17 — When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

Acts 19:1-6 — While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples and asked them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” They answered, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” So Paul asked, “Then what baptism did you receive?” “John’s baptism,” they replied. Paul said, “John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.” On hearing this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.

Do these accounts teach that Christians can expect an outpouring of the Holy Spirit subsequent to baptism? Note that we have no command to repeat this ceremony of laying on of hands. Nor is there any promise given us that the act of laying on of hands will impart the Holy Spirit in the future. We have only an apostolic example which cannot even be demonstrated to have been a consistent apostolic practice. Descriptive passages of Scripture do not determine binding practices. Only prescriptive passages can. Rome falls into the same theological error as Pentecostalism which draws binding principles from scriptural examples rather than from divine commands.

These two accounts are best understood in the light of a similar phenomenon recorded in Acts 10 and the gift of the Holy Spirit given to Cornelius during Peter’s visit. This miraculous gift of the Holy Spirit was evidenced by Cornelius’s speaking in tongues and was given prior to baptism (Ac 10:44-48). In each of these accounts we have an outpouring of the Holy Spirit as the gospel is brought to a new group of people. In Acts 8 the outpouring of the Holy Spirit signified that it was appropriate for the gospel to be proclaimed to the Samaritans, a people whom the Jews considered to be inferior. In Acts 10 the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Cornelius was a demonstration to Peter and the other Jews that the gospel was meant for Gentiles, too (Ac 10:34-36, 47; 15:7-9).

Acts 19 records another outpouring of the Holy Spirit at a crucial juncture in the early history of the church. On his second missionary journey Paul had been prevented by the Holy Spirit from preaching the Word in the province of Asia. God directed him instead to Europe through a vision of a man begging him to come to Macedonia (Ac 16:6-10). On his third missionary journey, however, Paul conducted an extensive ministry in Ephesus where he met a group who had not been properly instructed or baptized. Paul gave them instruction, baptized them, and laid his hands on them. They received a special gift of the Holy Spirit which enabled them to speak in tongues (Ac 19:1-7). This was a demonstration that God was approving Paul’s ministry in Asia. Ephesus subsequently became an important center of Christianity in that area of the world.

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit recorded in Acts happened at important turning points in the history of Christianity. They gave God’s stamp of approval to the preaching of the gospel to different ethnic groups and geographical areas according to the pattern Jesus revealed before he ascended—“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to

⁷⁵ P.T. Camelot, “Confirmation.” *New Catholic Encyclopedia*. (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1967), vol. 4, 145, 141-49.

the ends of the earth” (Ac 1:8). On other occasions there is no evidence of a laying-on-of-hands ceremony for the reception of the Holy Spirit following baptism.

To claim divine institution for confirmation or to give an impression that the rite of confirmation or the laying on of hands conveys the Holy Spirit is contrary to Scripture.

The Importance of the Means of Grace

Scripture clearly teaches that the Holy Spirit creates, preserves, and strengthens faith only through the means of grace, the gospel in Word and sacraments. There is no salvation apart from the gospel. Paul writes, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? . . . Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ” (Ro 10:13-14,17). We are to continue in God’s Word because it alone can make us wise for salvation. As Paul encourages Timothy, “As for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tm 3:14-15).

In baptism we receive forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. As Peter declared to those who were struck to the heart by his Pentecost sermon, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call” (Ac 2:38-39). Through baptism the Holy Spirit works rebirth and renewal. As Paul explains, “When the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life” (Tt 3:4-7). Baptism has a lifelong significance for the Christian. Through baptism he has become a partaker of Christ’s death and resurrection and has died to sin (Ro 6:2-7).

In baptism God brings us into his family and establishes his covenant of grace with us. God’s actions are unilateral. He does all the giving. We only receive. Since God’s covenant is unilateral and permanent, we will want to avoid speaking of a renewal of the baptismal covenant.

The Holy Spirit *confirms* faith through God’s Word and the Lord’s Supper (*sacramentum confirmationis*). Holy Communion is a remembrance of Christ’s suffering and death and the blessings which his work of redemption brings. In Communion he gives the very body and blood which accomplished our salvation to assure each partaker personally that his sins are forgiven. The Lord’s Supper is the sign and seal of the new covenant which is the forgiveness of sins. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Co 11:23-26).

We live in a society which does not understand the means of grace or the work of the Holy Spirit. Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Reformed, and Evangelicals misunderstand the sacraments, their use, purpose, and benefits. Lutheran pastors, therefore, will always want to be clear in their teaching on the means of grace and give proper emphasis to the sacraments. We will want to make sure that nothing in our ecclesiastical rites and ceremonies will lead anyone to misunderstand or denigrate the means through which the Holy Spirit creates, preserves, and strengthens faith. Preparation for confirmation will center in instruction in God’s Word with appropriate emphasis on the importance of baptism and communion for the life of the Christian.

Participation in the Lord's Supper is a confession of faith. Paul writes, "Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf" (1 Co 10:16-17). Since partaking of the Lord's Supper expresses unity of faith or fellowship, enough instruction must be given so that such a confession can be made intelligently. Participants must also be able to examine themselves and recognize what they are receiving in the Lord's Supper. Paul warns, "Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself" (1 Co 11:27-29). Pastors will take care that sufficient instruction is given and sufficient age has been reached for understanding the sacrament before allowing an individual to partake of Christ's body and blood.

Growing toward Christian Maturity

Christians who understand that the Scriptures are the words of eternal life will never be content with a superficial knowledge of God's Word. Like the Bereans of old they will want to search the Scriptures daily to see for themselves what God has to tell them. God encourages us to do that very thing. Through the pen of St. Peter he tells us, "Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pt 3:18). The writer to the Hebrews chastised his readers because they had remained children in their knowledge and understanding. "We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil" (Heb 5:11-14).

Christians also recognize the importance of instructing children and passing on to the next generation the precious truths of God's Word. The primary goal of Christian education is that students put their trust in their Savior and remain faithful to the end. As the psalmist declares, "O my people, hear my teaching, listen to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter hidden things, things from of old—what we have heard and known, what our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from their children; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done. He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which he commanded our forefathers to teach their children, so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children. Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds but would keep his commands" (Ps 78:1-7).

Growth in grace and knowledge is important for our daily battles with the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh. "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Eph 6:10-17).

Growing toward Christian maturity also means growing in the ability to testify to the truth. A goal of Christian education is to help people gain the ability to speak about their Savior and be able to explain what they believe and why they believe it. As St. Peter encourages, "Always be prepared to give an answer to

everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect” (1 Pt 3:15).

As we grow in our understanding of God’s Word we will recognize God’s grace toward us ever more clearly. We will cherish the glorious inheritance that awaits us in eternity. We will be able to take comfort in the face of all the problems in this life because we will recognize that everything in the universe is subject to Jesus. Everything must work out according to the plan of the one who lived and died for us. Jesus rules over everything for the sake of his people. St. Paul prayed that the Ephesians would grow in that knowledge and understanding:

I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way (Eph 1:17-23).

There is no substitute for Christian education. We will want to emphasize the importance of life-long study of Scripture. Patient encouragement to continue in God’s Word will always be necessary because of the many temptations and distractions of modern life.

Dealing with Adiaphora

Since Scripture has neither commanded nor forbidden the practice of confirmation, it is an adiaphoron. Just because something is an adiaphoron, however, does not mean that we can do anything we please with it. The Bible gives us some basic principles to follow in matters that God’s Word has not decided. There are certain questions we will want to ask before we change a custom or introduce one: 1) Is it beneficial? (1 Co 10:23); 2) Is it being done to the glory of God? (1 Co 10:31; Ro 14:6-8); 3) Is it being done for selfish reasons? (1 Co 10:24; Ro 14:15); 4) Will it cause people to stumble or fall? (1 Co 10:32-33; Ro 14:20-21); 5) Is it burdening consciences or limiting Christian freedom? (1 Co 10:29-30; Ro 14:16).

Introducing a new rite or changing a long-established practice calls for patient instruction. Trampling on sensitive consciences to accomplish a greater good is harmful. For the sake of peace and tranquillity in our congregations and synod, we will do everything in a fitting and orderly manner, dealing patiently with the weak while not letting Christian freedom be curtailed or allowing anyone to call something sinful which God has not.

Distinguishing Law and Gospel

The only way to overcome spiritual problems is through the proper application of law and gospel. The law’s primary purpose is to make people conscious of sin and hold them accountable to God. It cannot justify anyone or make him or her good in God’s eyes. Paul explains, “Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin”(Ro 3:19-20). The law also serves as a curb to hinder sin through threats of punishment and as a guide for the Christian in his life of sanctification. It cannot, however, make people godly.

The gospel of forgiveness proclaims peace with God and reconciliation. It changes hearts and makes the unwilling willing. It is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes (Ro 1:16). It relieves burdened consciences and calms troubled souls. The gospel also empowers for Christian living.

The work of the ministry calls for patient instruction, admonition, and application of law and gospel. We can always be confident that the Holy Spirit is at work when we proclaim God's Word and administer the sacraments, but we cannot put the Holy Spirit on a timetable. He works faith *where and when it pleases God*.⁷⁶ Frustration with the slowness of the gospel's progress can lead to legalism and attempts to force sanctification or faithfulness.

We will want to seek the young people who are straying from the fold and call them back to repentance by exposing their sin and applying God's forgiveness. We will want to admonish parents who neglect the spiritual welfare of their children and remind them of the importance of bringing their children up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. There is no quick fix or easy solution to spiritual problems. The proper application of law and gospel is the solution to every spiritual problem that faces our people. Changing our forms of worship or practice of confirmation will not solve any problems if we are not willing to give personal admonition and instruction to the weak and straying.

III. Practical Implications

Practice flows from theology. What we believe shapes what we do. Those who are writing the new order for confirmation will want to avoid anything that suggests a sacramental view of confirmation or implies that confirmation completes baptism or grants membership in the Christian Church. Pietism's subjective approach with its emphasis on conversion experience or personal testimonials has no place in a confessional Lutheran rite which emphasizes the means of grace. The emphasis in confirmation is on what God has done in baptism and what he offers in the Lord's Supper. The rite may appropriately include a confession of faith. It is the very nature of a Christian to confess his faith and the fervent intent of every believer to suffer all rather than fall away from the faith. An oath or a vow will not, however, keep anyone faithful. To use the confirmation vow as a reason for remaining in the church is legalism.

Many are legitimately concerned about the graduation syndrome of confirmation and the fact that so many of our young people drift away from the church during their high school and college years. Does the fault lie with our practice of confirmation or does the fault lie somewhere else? Some who have moved confirmation to the senior year in high school have recognized that they have only delayed the graduation syndrome to late adolescence. Moving the time of confirmation has not proved beneficial in retaining young people.⁷⁷ Spiritual problems demand spiritual solutions. The devil and the world are placing many temptations in front of our young people. Youth Bible classes which include pointed applications to the lives of our young people and address the problems they are facing are one answer to the problem. Parental involvement in the religious education of their children is another. The new *Christ-Light*TM curriculum is an attempt to involve parents and to provide coordinated materials for continuing education after confirmation. We will want to help parents carry out their instructional responsibilities in the home. We cannot assume that parents will know what they are to do.

Students in pre- and early adolescence present unique educational challenges to the instructor. By demonstrating to our young people the value of what they are learning we can overcome much of the apparent resistance to confirmation instruction. A teacher will always want to apply the precious truths of Scripture to the lives of the students in his class. The study of doctrine is always practical. The wise teacher will help his students see how it is practical and valuable for them not only for their future lives, but for their present lives as well. Those who recognize the value of their confirmation instruction will also recognize the value of youth and adult Bible classes.

⁷⁶ AC V, 2.

⁷⁷ Browning and Reed, op. cit, p 80-81.

As Lutheran educators we will want to state clearly our educational goals for confirmation classes and for youth and adult Bible classes. The educational level of our students, their intellectual development, and their maturity level have to be taken into account when we establish our goals. The basic teachings of sin and grace, law and gospel will always be of primary concern for a confessional Lutheran pastor. Since we live in a pluralistic society which offers many spiritual challenges to our young people, we will also want our students to recognize where other religious groups depart from Scripture. We will want to teach them in such a way that they will be able to search the Scriptures for themselves to find the answers to the many questions which trouble them.

Tests have a place in good educational methodology. Tests provide the opportunity for review and give the instructor a check on his students' understanding. We will want to be very careful, however, not to give students the impression that we are grading their faith or judging their Christianity on the basis of academic tests. We do not want to confuse academic achievement with saving faith.

A public examination of confirmands has become traditional in our circles and can serve a useful purpose. The examination is not meant to determine whether an individual is a sincere Christian; nor is it a pass/fail test to decide whether an individual will be allowed to be confirmed. It is an opportunity for the children to confess their faith as they answer the pastor's questions in their own words. The examination shows the congregation that the confirmands understand the creedal confession which they will recite at their confirmation and it demonstrates to the congregation that the children are ready for the Lord's Supper. A public examination also gives the members of the congregation an opportunity to review the basic teachings of the Bible. Because of the natural nervousness of the children and the pressure inherent in a public examination the pastor will want to keep the whole process as low key as possible.⁷⁸

Since confirmation is an adiaphoron we are free to retain our practice, modify it, or drop it altogether. We will want to determine whether any change will be beneficial or cause more problems. Whatever we do will require continued patient instruction. Our people have to know why we do what we do. Just as our liturgical worship will not always be appreciated or understood without periodic explanations and reminders, so also our practice of confirmation will not be understood without a careful explanation. We will want to instruct our people so that they do not misunderstand the nature or purpose of this ecclesiastical rite.

Common sense seems to indicate that there ought to be a way of stating who has had the instruction necessary to receive the Lord's Supper. A public rite like confirmation serves that purpose, just as ordination and installation serve the purpose of declaring who has been properly trained and called for a particular office in the church. In order to avoid confusion and problems the congregations of our synod will want to maintain a uniform practice if at all possible. The mobility of our society makes uniformity and consistency in practice desirable (e.g., the age at which we confirm). At the same time we recognize a need for some flexibility. Mission congregations and established congregations which have no Lutheran elementary school currently demonstrate flexibility in the length of instruction required and the age at which children are confirmed.

If we continue the practice of confirming children, it also seems appropriate to confirm adult converts. We would be wise to give some attention to the subject of adult instruction before confirmation. The trend seems to be to reduce the amount of time adults spend in instruction before they are confirmed. In an age in which biblical literacy is declining less instruction does not seem to be in the best interests of our adult converts nor our congregations.

Some have raised objections to many of the externals which have become part of Lutheran confirmation practice, e.g., laying on of hands, white gowns, flowers, confirmation verses, family dinners, etc. They suggest that these things add to the graduation mentality associated with confirmation. Congregations will want to examine such practices to see whether they are beneficial or not. Long-standing traditions do not change quickly. Wise leaders will follow Luther in retaining those things which are beneficial and changing those which are not, but only after patient instruction.

⁷⁸ Schuetze and Habeck, *op. cit.*, p 122-124.

Confirmation, like any church rite, can serve to build up the church or cause it problems. May God give us the wisdom to use or develop practices which give all glory to him and serve the best interests of his kingdom.