

Confirmation: Is Eighth Grade the Right Age?

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Why? That word has always intrigued me. I remember as a child asking my parents why. Why did that happen? Why do we do things this way? Why do I have to do that? As we have been raising our daughter we have also been confronted with the many whys.

Throughout my life I have often questioned why we do certain things in the Christian church the way we do. I remember coming to St. Mark's and noting that before every service the bell seemed to ring endlessly. One day I asked one of the worship service men, "How many times do you ring the bell before service?" He informed me, "We ring the bell 33 times." I asked, "Why?" and he answered, "Because Jesus lived on this earth for 33 years." Usually there is a reason and explanation for why we do things the way we do them. I can remember as a student asking one of my professors why in some churches they rang the bell three times during the Lord's Prayer. He gave me two answers. He said, "Some say it is for the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. However, I believe it was used in Europe to signal to the servants at home that the church service was almost over and that they should get the dinner on the table because the family would soon be coming home from church." Both answers certainly make a lot of sense and do answer the question why.

My desire to learn why is one of the reasons why I was intrigued with the assignment that you gave to me on confirmation and the question, “Is eighth grade the right age for confirmation. I had never done that much research and reading into the history and background of confirmation. Your assignment gave me an opportunity to do some research, reading and questioning about a practice that has been followed by our church for centuries.

As we address the question “Is Eighth Grade the right age for Confirmation,” I would like to briefly review with you 1) the history of confirmation within Christendom; 2) the history of confirmation within the Lutheran church through the centuries and 3) the purpose of confirmation. In light of its history and purpose I would then. Like to 4) make some observations and pose some questions as to the relevancy of confirmation for the Lutheran Church at the close of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty first century and finally V) look at the question “Is eighth grade the right age for confirmation?”

A Brief History of Confirmation in Early Christendom

Confirmation is an adiaphoron. That is, it is neither commanded nor forbidden in the Scriptures. Nowhere do we find any specific references to confirmation in the Bible. However, when it comes to the two sacraments, there are definite references and commands that we baptize and commune. Jesus commands us, (Matthew 28:19) “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” The Bible also teaches us regarding the Lord’s Supper, (1 Corinthians 11:24-25) “This is my body which is for you; do this in remembrance of me. This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.”

There are those who attempt to trace confirmation back to the apostolic Christian church and to the laying on of hands and the anointing with oil that often accompanied baptism. Some will point to the laying on of hands which Peter and John employed with the believers in Samaria. (cf. Acts 8:14-17) Others point to “setting his seal of ownership on us” as a reference to confirmation. (cf. 2 Corinthians 1:20-22, Ephesians 1:13-14, 4:30) In most of these references however, it appears that the reference to the sealing of the Spirit is speaking about baptism. Yet there are instances where the Holy Spirit was imparted through the laying one of hands. (cf Acts 9:17, Ananias laying his hands on Saul [Paul])

Within the early Christian church a variety of practices were followed regarding initiation into church membership. There was water baptism, anointing with oil and the laying on of hands. Often times all three rites took place at the same time. As time passed they were separated. By the fourth century confirmation had become a separate rite, separate from baptism. In fact, baptism was performed by the local parish priest and the confirmation or anointing was done by the bishop.

Some of the early development of confirmation may also be traced back to life in the local synagogue. Since many of the early Christians were Jewish and had been raised in the synagogue, they may have modified somewhat their bar-mitzvah and beth-mitzvah to become a confirmation. Much of our order of worship, the reading of the Scriptures, the speaking from a raised platform all hark back to synagogue worship.

As the Christian church expanded and grew, different practices developed in the East and the West. In the eastern churches confirmation or anointing was closely connected with baptism and first communion. Often times in the same service a person was baptized, confirmed and received holy communion. All three were considered sacraments. In the western church confirmation was separated from the sacrament of baptism. The local parish priest would baptize, but only the bishop could confirm. The bishop might come to a church once a year to perform confirmations. During the medieval ages confirmation became more and more infrequent. In the west confirmation was considered a sacrament during the first half of the twelfth century. However, it was not declared a sacrament by the church until the Council of Florence in 1439. In 1547 the Council of Trent fixed this as official doctrine that confirmation is a sacrament. The Council also fixed the age of confirmation between the ages of seven and twelve.

The Reformation and the Lutheran Church

During the Reformation, Lutheran, Melancthon, the Lutheran Confession as well as John Calvin all opposed the Roman Catholic teaching regarding confirmation that it was a supplement to baptism, conferring grace and granting the gift of the Holy Spirit. Luther, however, was not opposed to an evangelical confirmation, as long as it did not detract from the sacraments. Luther emphasized instruction in connection with both sacraments. He was especially concerned about preparing people properly for the reception of the Lord's Supper. This was the first step toward restructuring confirmation. The need for religious instruction was realized by all of the evangelicals. This emphasis on religious instruction led in time to the Lutheran confirmation. The term "confirmation" in Luther's day was not used because it was regarded as a Catholic heresy. The restructuring of confirmation in the Lutheran church did not follow any formal pattern. As a result you are able to see six emphases which appeared and had their impact on the development of confirmation within the Lutheran Church. They are: 1) the catechetical, 2) the hierarchical, 3) the sacramental, 4) the traditional, 5) the pietistic and 6) the rationalistic.

The catechetical influence really was not that concerned with confirmation. Rather it was a time of preparation and instruction for a person before he received the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. This educational, process was not necessarily followed by any formal rite. However, after a time, there was a small ceremony which developed. Usually this consisted of a prayer of intercession by the people led by the pastor for the person before he received the sacrament of Holy Communion. This type of confirmation was most common within the Lutheran Church for the first one hundred and fifty years.

The hierarchical form of confirmation had its origins with Martin Bucer. He combined the educational and subjective concerns of Erasmus together with the disciplinary and pastoral concerns of Luther. Bucer may be regarded as the father of Lutheran confirmation. Bucer introduced the vow taken by the confirmand to submit himself to Christ and to the discipline of the church. This is the reason that this form of confirmation was called hierarchical. Bucer developed and printed special orders for confirmation.

The sacramental tendencies appeared within the above forms of confirmation. It emphasized the laying on of hands and the idea that through this the Holy Spirit was imparted to the confirmand. Also the idea that confirmation made you a member of the Christian church not just the local congregation gave clergy and laity alike the idea that confirmation was a sacrament. These ideas came as a result of unclear wording in the rites of confirmation which Martin Bucer developed.

There were attempts within Lutheranism to return to the traditional form of confirmation without the Roman Catholic heretical teachings. In the traditional form confirmation emphasized the laying on of hands and especially the instruction which preceded this. First communion often occurred a few weeks or months after the rite of confirmation. Later in the 17th and 18th centuries first communion often took place one or two years after confirmation.

In the late 1600's and early 1700's a new movement made its mark on the rite of confirmation. That movement was pietism. Under the influence of Philip Spener confirmation was restructured to conform to his conversion theology. The vow became an occasion to renew one's baptismal covenant. The confession of faith became subjective in nature as did the examination, the preparation for the Lord's Supper and the confirmation blessing. The age of confirmation was also advanced because the confirmands were supposed to "feel" their new life. It was during the pietistic influence that memory verses were added to the rite of confirmation.

The next major movement which had an impact on confirmation was rationalist. Rationalism de-emphasized the sacraments and stressed man's understanding and reason. The rationalistic style of confirmation was to make this an event which gave meaning to a person's baptism. Confirmation now became the festival of youth in which a person made his public declaration to become a member of the church. Confirmation became so important that other rights and privileges were also associated with it. For example, voting rights, belonging to a guild, being able to be a sponsor at a baptism or to be married in the church were all rights that went along with confirmation. In addition to these special privileges the rationalists introduced the wearing of robes. It became closely associated with graduation from elementary school and the end of formal education. This usually occurred at the age of 13 or 14. Unfortunately, putting this together with graduation

from school caused people to assume that confirmation was also the conclusion of formal religious instruction and training.

It is also interesting to point out that Palm Sunday was chosen by the church as the day for confirmation because in Europe it normally fell about one week before spring graduation from school.

As you review the various influences which have had their impact on the development of confirmation within the Lutheran church, you can see the vestiges of some of them had on our current practices and ceremonies associated with confirmation.

When our Lutheran ancestors moved to the new world, they brought many of their confirmation practices and ideas with them. As a result, many of the customs and traditions which surround our confirmation rites today may be traced back to the: various historical influences. which shaped the development of confirmation within the Lutheran church.

The Purpose of Confirmation

What is the purpose of confirmation? It is interesting to see the impact of pietism and rationalism on our thinking regarding the rite of confirmation. In our synod's revised Gausewitz Catechism of 1956 it is stated, "#367 When is the baptismal promise of children renewed publicly? The baptismal promise of children is renewed publicly when they are confirmed after proper instruction." (Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism. Gausewitz edition. 1956. p. 205.) That answer certainly reflects the pietistic and rationalistic emphasis that confirmation completed one's baptism. We see that same influence again in question 416. "Who should not be admitted to the Lord's Supper? D. 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." (Ibid. p. 227.) This idea is further strengthened in the confirmation rite itself when the first question which is addressed to the confirmands asks, "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? I do." (The Lutheran Agenda. p. 23.)

As I looked into the new exposition of Luther's Small Catechism by David Kuske, I found that the emphasis on renewing one's baptismal covenant had been removed. The following statements regarding confirmation are made. "Confirmation. A ceremony following instruction in which Christians confess their faith and are acknowledged as sufficiently instructed to receive Holy Communion." (Luther's Catechism. David Kuske. 1982. p. 338.) The only other reference to confirmation is this "301. To whom does God want us to give Holy Communion? 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)." (Ibid. p. 264.)

As you can see within our own church body the reasoning and thought behind the purpose of confirmation has been changing. We are beginning to remove some of the pietistic and rationalistic ideas which have surrounded confirmation for several centuries. What then is the purpose of confirmation? Confirmation is merely the public rite by which we in the church are saying that a person is able to examine himself and is now ready to participate in the Lord's Supper.

There is another side to this question and that is, how do many of the people in our congregations view confirmation? From my observations I would say that many view confirmation as graduation. And why shouldn't they? Many of the things that we do in connection with confirmation say loudly and clearly to people that confirmation means the end of formal religious training. The public examination, the robes and flowers, the pictures, the ending of any formal religious educational program for our children at this point by the local congregation all says confirmation is examination. We may say that confirmation does not mean this, yet our custom and practices all say that confirmation is examination.

Some Observations and Questions

If it isn't broken, don't fix it. Can this statement be applied to our confirmation practices and customs? I don't believe so. Since confirmation is an adiaphoron, that means it is always open to examination, modification and change to conform to the needs of the church in the twentieth and twenty first centuries. A question that we need to consider concerning our present confirmation practices is this, "Are the present customs, traditions and major emphasis placed on confirmation, at least in our area, destroying our churches?"

Are we giving the impression that when a child is confirmed, he knows all that is to be known and is fully equipped spiritually to face the sinful world? Of course, we would all say, no. But why then in most of our congregations does formal religious training, instruction and study come to an end?

Is the custom in many of our churches of a formal public examination cruel and misleading? When I came to St. Mark's, I remember people telling me about the frightening experiences that they had during their public examination before confirmation. The fear and terror that some of them experienced will never be forgotten. All of this in their minds is associated with confirmation. What is the purpose of this? I have heard some say that this is a good review of Christian doctrine for the members of the congregation. That may be true. But does anyone ever give thought to the teens who must go through this initiation rite? It is as if we are saying, "Well, when I was your age I had to go through this torture and so now so do you." It might be well to take into consideration what our young people are like at this time in their lives. At eighth grade teens are extremely self-conscious. Many are very conscious of how they appear. They don't like themselves. All they can see are their failings and shortcomings. Many of them feel very uncomfortable getting up in front of crowds of people and then to be quizzed by their pastor before parents, relatives, friends and peers can be very unnerving and humiliating. Is it time to rethink and re-evaluate this whole concept of public examination before confirmation? Does not the process of public examination also re-enforce the thought and idea in people's minds that confirmation means examination?

You often hear the sad lament that after confirmation we lose so many young people. I wonder, did we ever have some of them to begin with? Are we using Luther's Small Catechism and confirmation like a small pox vaccination? Do we give children their two or three years of formal instructions in God's Word with their pastor and then say to them, "You are now prepared to deal with any and every thing that may come your way in life"? By our present confirmation practices are we saying to our young people, "You know all that needs to be known to live the Christian life and to fight against the temptations that you will encounter"? I am sure, that we would all say that that is not the case. It may not be. But don't our practices say that? How many of our churches continue some formal Christian training after confirmation? How many of our congregations have developed and are employing cradle to the grave Christian education programs? Or is confirmation instruction the be all and end all of Christian training for most of our members?

What can we do? It is going to take years of education and instruction with our people to change some of these traditions and customs. But I believe that it is time we did something. Our local congregations need to evaluate their Christian education programs. The devil and the world don't stop instructing at a certain age. Their instruction and training in wickedness is a life long program. Our people are daily confronted with it on their TV sets, in the magazines and newspapers that they read, in the books that are being published. Within the Christian church we need the same thorough and on going indoctrination and educational program to combat the attacks of Satan and his kingdom. As the Apostle Peter writes, (1 Peter 5:8-9) "Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him standing firm in the faith." To stand firm in the faith we need the means of grace, the Gospel in Word and sacraments to strengthen and help us in our battle with Satan. Since the devil never stops his attempts at educating and training in wickedness, so we in the Christian church need to intensify and continue our education and training in righteousness. Jesus commands us, (Matthew 28:19-20) "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." Our teaching is not just a few year catechism course. It needs to be life long. Unfortunately, in many of our congregations, customs and traditions have left the impression that confirmation ends "teaching them all things."

This is an area where we need to re-evaluate, re-examine and carefully consider our reasons and goals in Christian education. It will require changing mind-sets, attitudes, and misleading traditions and customs. It won't be easy. Just consider all of the reactions we are receiving from the new/revised hymnal sampler. And we have only had our present hymnal for 45 years. Our confirmation practices and traditions go back for centuries.

Is Eighth Grade the Right Age for Confirmation?

By now, you may have noticed that I have skirted the question of eighth grade being the right age for confirmation and have taken a broader look at our entire practice of confirmation.

Historically you will have noticed that since confirmation was linked with the end of formal elementary education, it came at the age of 13 or 14. Since our formal education programs no longer end with elementary schooling, it may be wise to move confirmation back to the 10th or 11th grades.

Right now confirmation comes during one of the most stressful and unsettling times in a young person's life. Confirmation comes at the same time as adolescence. Physically, emotionally and mentally our teens are changing at that point in their lives. They are going through a rebellious time. They are no longer children, yet they are not full grown independent adults either. It is also a time of questioning, evaluating and formulating and accepting a certain value system and beliefs. I have always found it rather interesting and disturbing that during this time of turmoil we in the Lutheran church seem to say, "well, you have been instructed and confirmed" and then throw them out into the world and let them go. This is one of the most critical times in a teen's life. It is a time when we as spiritual shepherds should be having close personal contact with our teens. But we have confirmed them, shoved them out the door and said, good by and good luck. We have done all the formal preparing that we intend to do for you. Now come to church every Sunday.

I don't know when confirmation should take place or first communion. However, I am thoroughly convinced that as Lutherans we need to restudy and evaluate our local congregation's Christian education programs so that they include Christian education and training from the cradle to the grave. I also believe that we should de-emphasize the rite of confirmation as some sort of graduation experience and emphasize more the importance of the use of the means of grace, the reading, study and hearing of the Word of God and the regular and frequent reception of the Lord's Supper. For this and this alone preserves us in the faith and strengthens us in our battle with our own sinful flesh and our evil enemies of the devil and the world. In some way our present practices have given people a false sense of security about their relationship with God and their salvation. Numerous times since I have come to St. Mark's I have heard people say, "I was baptized, confirmed and married at St. Mark's and I will be buried there too." This statement from people who seldom attend church services and very rarely commune. It is as if their membership in the church and the fact that they were confirmed is their ticket to heaven.

In this area of confirmation, we do have some problems. Problems that need to be studied, addressed and handled.

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