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Richard Rist

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, ir_ristr@csl.edu

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THE DEVELOPMENT AND SIGNIFICANCE OF
CONFIRMATION IN THE LUTHERAN CHURCH

A Research Paper Presented to the Faculty
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for elective
P-200

by
Richard Rist
February, 1976

Rudolph H. Harms

Adviser

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INTRODUCTION

In the past few years it has come to the attention of many people that the practice of confirmation in the Lutheran Church may need some revision, or at least some restudy, in order for it to remain in a proper perspective that would be a clear witness to the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. The purpose of this study is to explore the rite of confirmation as practiced in the Lutheran Church. Much emphasis will be given to the development of confirmation from the early Church until the present practice of Lutheran confirmation in the United States. This study will also focus upon the significance and status of the various aspects of the confirmation rite. Another important area of study will be the relationship of the confirmation rite to the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion. This study will also take into account the aspect of Christian education and possible alternatives to our present practice of requiring confirmation before admission to Holy Communion.

"For the last two decades there have been stirrings of discontent about confirmation here in North America as well as elsewhere in the world."¹ For this reason there has been an increase of interest in the theology and practice of confirmation by religious leaders of the major denominations of the Lutheran Church in the United States. A Joint Commission on the Theology and Practice of Confirmation was organized in the early 1960's by The American Lutheran Church, The Lutheran Church in America, and The Lutheran Church - Missouri

¹W. Kent Gilbert, ed., Confirmation and Education. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), p. 5.

Synod. The purpose of this commission was to make an extensive exploration of current confirmation practices, and formulate a fresh approach to the practice of confirmation which could become a uniform practice in the Lutheran Church. "A survey made by the commission in 1967 showed clearly the wide divergence of views on confirmation held by both clergy and laity."² It is important for the life and mission of the Church that we understand why we hold to the rite of confirmation, and what the factors are which essentially can be considered Lutheran in our present day practice of confirmation. "It is healthy every so often to examine carefully some of our automatic procedures and assumptions. This we should do with even a time-honored, important rite of the Church, such as confirmation."³

²Ibid.

³Frank W. Klos, Confirmation and First Communion. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), p. 10.

CHAPTER I

THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF CONFIRMATION

Before we can fully understand the practice of confirmation as it is currently practiced in the Lutheran Church it is of vital importance to unfold and sort out the historical situations and developments that have come to us by way of tradition and custom. We must, therefore, go back as far as the New Testament in order to capture some idea of what has come to be known as the rite of confirmation. "The New Testament nowhere speaks of confirmation. There are no scriptural mandates for its inclusion in the rites of the church either from Jesus himself or from any of the leaders of the apostolic community."¹

During the early centuries of the history of the Christian Church, there were a number of changes taking place in the practice of Holy Baptism. The ideas that people were becoming aware of were eventually to lead toward a distinction in what was received at baptism. One of the necessary changes of this period was a result of an awareness on the part of religious leaders that the return of Christ might not be for a considerable period of time. The generations following after the apostles recognized the continuation and growth of the Christian Church as a command left to them by their Lord. With the influence of pagan cultures there arose the need to develop and formulate creeds of faith which would become a common basis for all Christians. "Baptism in this period was becoming more and more complicated. It was now performed 'In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' reflecting

¹Ibid., p. 32.

the ending of Matthew's Gospel (Matthew 28:19) instead of simply 'in the name of Jesus.' Adults being baptized were asked to affirm their faith with more lengthy creeds than the concise 'Jesus is Lord' of biblical days. The rite itself now involved the use of oil as well as water."²

Much confusion arose, which was to become prominent in the third century from a forced synthesis by Tertullian and Cyprian of a puzzling narrative in Acts viii. 1-17, with the result that the gift of the Spirit was an essential aspect of the inward significance of water-baptism itself.³ Their ideas came out clearly in the Rebaptism controversy of the third century. "The point at issue was where one must begin the initiation of a man who has received Baptisma in an heretical sect and is now wishing to be received into the Catholic Church."⁴ The Rebaptism controversy marks a turning point in the history of baptismal rites and initiation into the Church because of what we might call innovations due to logical reasonableness and theological presuppositions. "The Romans contended that it only became operative for salvation for the first time when 'vivified,' as it were, by the gift of the Spirit, which could be received in the Catholic Church alone."⁵ With the rise of the Gnostic sects we find an influence upon the separation of a water-baptism and a Spirit-baptism. The available sources from New Testament times to Irenaeus are absent of the Gnostic tendency which makes a distinction between water-baptism and Spirit-baptism.

²Ibid., p. 36.

³G. W. H. Lampe, The Seal of the Spirit. (London: Longmans, Green and Co Ltd., 1951), p. 119.

⁴Dom Gregory Dix, The Theology of Confirmation in Relation to Baptism. (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1953), p. 20.

⁵Ibid.

"The Apostolic Tradition presents us with a description of a fully developed rite of Baptism, a prototype of those which appear in the later liturgies. It comprises an account of the selection of fit catechumens, their three-year period under instruction, exorcism, anointing after the renunciation of Satan, baptism, profession of faith, unction by a presbyter, and anointing and signing by the bishop in the presence of the congregation. The whole rite, which is immediately followed by Communion, is solemn and impressive in the highest degree."⁶ The importance of this tradition ascribed to Hippolytus cannot be overlooked in the development of the confirmation rite as we know it. "It supplements the information provided by Tertullian's De Baptismo, and enables us to carry our acquaintance with the liturgical tradition of the Church back to the beginning of the third century."⁷ By the time of Hippolytus the Roman tradition had assimilated practices attributed to the Gnostic sects. "Unction and signing with the Cross represent a translation into visible action of Scriptural metaphors, and their development would probably have taken place sooner or later even without the stimulus of the insistence laid upon them in Gnosticism."⁸ Out of these changes there will eventually come forth a division of baptism as a sacrament and also confirmation as a sacrament in the sense of bestowing grace necessary for salvation by religious leaders and theologians.

The significance we place upon The Apostolic Tradition for the study of the development of confirmation is not that it is an early apostolic procedure, but because it is a witness for a distinction between the inward signifi-

⁶Lampe, The Seal of the Spirit., p. 132.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid., p. 130.

cance of water-baptism and the grace associated with the bishop's blessing. Therefore, certain ceremonies now attached to baptism will in due time come to be regarded, particularly by the Western Church, as a distinct and separate rite of confirmation.⁹ With the division of the Church into two separate groups, the Eastern Orthodox and the Western Roman, there begins to arise peculiar customs in both church bodies in respect to the idea of confirmation as a separate and distinct rite. "The Eastern fathers differed from those in the West in their emphasis on the gift of the Holy Spirit in baptism, where as the latter stressed the forgiveness of sins, reserving the gift of the Holy Spirit for the laying-on-of-hands which developed into confirmation. The word confirmation (*confirmatio*) appears for the first time in the second canon of the first Council of Orange in 441 A.D., in Sacrorum Conciliorum Nova et Amplissima Collectio, ed. by Mansi (Florence: 1762), VI, 435. Its fully developed theology is set out in an influential homily on Pentecost ascribed to Faustus of Riez (d. 490)."¹⁰

Shortly after the growth and expansion of the Christian Church, safeguards in the form of more formalized practices of instruction were initiated by the bishops. Catechumens were carefully instructed and only admitted to the preaching service. "The special acts of consecration used to admit 'hearers' (catechumens) to the prayers of the church (*genu flectentes*) from the beginning of the present rites of confirmation. Not until just before baptism were the words of the baptismal confession (Apostle's Creed) revealed. Catechumens were received by the laying-on-of-hands, exorcism, and the presentation of consecrated salt."¹¹

⁹Ibid., pp. 141-142.

¹⁰Carl Volz, "The Catechumenate in the Early Church," Teaching the Faith, (River Forest, Ill.: Lutheran Education Association, 1967), p. 10. (Footnote)

¹¹Gustav K. Wiencke, "Confirmation in Historical Perspective," The Lutheran Quarterly 7 (May 1955): 100.

Hippolytus does not formally make a separation between the inward significance of baptism and the outward sealing made by the bishop. However, the visible sealing by the bishop as the head of the Christian family to mark the new member as one of Christ's will have far-reaching consequences.¹² One of the consequences was the change in terminology in the Western Church. Prior to this time, the Latin name for the Baptism of the Spirit had been the Scriptural term 'the Seal'--signaculum, consignatio. However, as has been noted above, the term confirmatio comes to be associated with 'the Seal.' "The change of term has its own significance. A document which needs 'sealing' is not valid until the seal has been affixed. The 'confirmation' of a document, though it may add to its authority, implies that it was already operative before it was 'confirmed.' This is precisely the change of emphasis which was now taking place in the West."¹³

From the period of the fifth century to the early Middle Ages there was a gradual weakening of the rigid initiation rites for baptism because of the large number of people being received into the Church. "The old concept of the Church as the congregation of the saved was altered to the idea of the Church as an institution to mediate salvation."¹⁴ By the beginning of the eighth century baptism, particularly infant baptism, was becoming such routine practice that only a short liturgical form was used by the priest, mainly for the benefit of the sponsors. "The old pre-baptismal examination became a magic ritual--for example, the priest would examine the ear opening of the child. Then the priest repeated the Creed in place of the child."¹⁵

¹²Lampe, The Seal of the Spirit. p. 147.

¹³Dix, The Theology of Confirmation in Relation to Baptism. p. 25.

¹⁴Gustav K. Wiencke, "Confirmation in Historical Perspective," The Lutheran Quarterly 7 (May. 1955): 100.

¹⁵Ibid.

In the early Middle Ages confirmation was now taking on a new significance. "Already in the first half of the twelfth century Hugo of St. Victor (d. 1114) referred to confirmation as the second sacrament."¹⁶ It was more than a century later that confirmation actually came to be recognized as a separate rite and elevated to the status of a sacrament in 1274 A.D. "Confirmation now became a part of the Roman sacramental system and was said to bestow grace and a 'certain spiritual and indelible sign' necessary for salvation, equal in power to all other sacraments. Confirmation was regarded as a complement to Baptism and was accompanied by the sacred chrism and the laying-on-of-hands."¹⁷

One interesting factor which stimulated the popular notion that confirmation was more important than baptism was the fact that priests were allowed to baptize, but only a bishop could confirm and bestow the gift of the Holy Spirit. This led to a not uncommon feeling by common people and the clergy alike that there was something more important or special about the sacrament of confirmation. "In 1439, the church held the Council of Florence, Italy and formally identified the seven sacraments--Baptism, confirmation, ordination, marriage, penance, Holy Communion, and extreme unction--and defined them in the canons. Actually, the council codified only what had already been accepted in practice since the time of Thomas Aquinas."¹⁸

The Roman Catholic View of Confirmation

With this historical background to confirmation in mind, it is important to note the two views of confirmation held by the Roman and Eastern Churches prior to the Reformation. Broadly speaking, the Roman view was one of an infusion of graces by the episcopal laying-on-of-hands. In effect, the Roman

¹⁶ Arthur C. Repp, Confirmation in the Lutheran Church. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), p. 14.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁸ Frank W. Klos, Confirmation and First Communion. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), p. 44.

sacramental view of confirmation is a completion of baptism in the sense that the Holy Spirit is called upon to confirm the faith which was begun in baptism. The point at which confirmation of faith is made has been set at the age of seven, or the age of rationality. This is the point in a child's life when he is said to be able to discern between right and wrong. "At this critical juncture, a Catholic child has, of course, the support of his baptism and the upbringing to facilitate the right decision. But it is highly desirable that he should be further assisted by the outpouring of that Almighty Counselor and Strengthener who is given in confirmation."¹⁹ This view of confirmation leads to the conclusion that it was somehow instituted to give an extra measure of the Holy Spirit. In this respect, confirmation can also be thought of as a sacrament of perseverance. By this, it is meant that something is still needed at the time of confirmation to help a child in the battle for the conquest of his moral life. "Confirmation at the age of reason not only ensures an initial personal preference for God, but also perseverance in the engagement to Christ and the Church publicly proclaimed at one's baptism."²⁰

However, "it should be clearly noted that even for Roman Catholics participation in the sacrament is not a non-rational matter in which a child-- or for that matter an adult--may participate without really knowing what is going on."²¹ When a child does reach the age of rationality, he must first go to confession and be able to examine himself properly so as not to receive the sacrament unworthily or to his judgment.

The Orthodox View of Confirmation

An even more radical view of confirmation was and still is held by the

¹⁹J. P. Kenny, "The Age for Confirmation," Worship 35 (December 1960): 14.

²⁰Ibid., 15.

²¹Martin J. Heineken, "Confirmation in Relation to the Lord's Supper," The Lutheran Quarterly 25 (February 1963): 24.

Eastern Orthodox Church. One of the basic notions behind their view is what we might call the practice of lay ordination. In the case of infant baptism a child is blessed with holy oil to signify the coming of the Holy Spirit. This practice is called chrismation and is given to infants immediately after baptism, and also to adults who have been baptized and wish to become members of the Church. "The sacrament of chrismation in the Greek Catholic thinking is a form of lay ordination, enabling the baptized members to participate in other sacraments and to contribute to the life of the Christian community. Without the seal of the Spirit, as chrismation is sometimes called, the baptized person, it is felt, will have a hard time achieving virtuous Christian living or achieving moral perfection."²² The practice of chrismation is even more unique when one considers the premise that the holy oil must be blessed by a bishop before it can be administered. This implies that the power of the Holy Spirit is only able to work through the special privilege of a bishop. "If the Holy Ghost only descends at the mighty imprecation of a Bishop, they are most unfortunate who live in farms or villages, or who happen to die in remote spots after being baptized by Presbyters or Deacons before the Bishop can discover them. The whole salvation of the Church hangs on the Bishop's self-importance."²³

The Development of Confirmation in the Lutheran Church

It is with this foundation properly laid that we are now able to move onward to the Lutheran Reformation which becomes a point of significance for the theology and practice of confirmation from the time of Martin Luther to the present situation in the Lutheran Church. The tradition and customs which have surrounded the practice of confirmation have changed drastically in the past 450

²²Klos, Confirmation and First Communion. p. 45.

²³Dix, The Theology of Confirmation in Relation to Baptism. p. 23.

years. This is no small wonder because of the ambiguous character of a practice which has no Scriptural basis. It is, therefore, necessary to examine, at some length, the developmental process of Lutheran confirmation. Shortly after Martin Luther's break with the Roman Catholic Church he became concerned with the instruction and nurture of baptized children. He was almost unconcerned with confirmation because of the Roman view that confirmation was said to complete Holy Baptism. "To him any abridgement of Holy Baptism was blasphemous."²⁴ Because of his violent reaction to the Roman view he did not encourage the practice of confirmation because of the very real possibility that people may fall back into the Roman practice which was one reason he broke with the Roman Catholic Church in the first place.

Luther's emphasis was placed primarily upon the two sacraments. In the first place, he was concerned with catechetical instruction. Baptism placed an obligation upon parents and sponsors to see to it that a child's faith is properly nurtured. He also was very concerned about young Christians being instructed properly to partake of the Lord's Supper in a worthy manner.²⁵ Luther was keenly aware of the Church's responsibility to educate its members. This was especially evident in his view that everyone should be able to give an account of his faith before receiving the Lord's Supper. With this in mind, we are better able to understand why Luther directed fathers and pastors to accept the opportunity to teach their children or members of their congregations in order to train them as Christians. Luther himself explains why it is necessary to use the Catechism for instruction and Christian growth. "Not only do we need God's Word daily as we need our daily bread; we also must use it daily against the daily, incessant attacks and ambushes of the devil with his thousand arts. If this were not enough to admonish us to read the

²⁴Repp, Confirmation in the Lutheran Church. p. 16.

²⁵Ibid., pp. 18-19.

Catechism daily, there is God's command."²⁶

Luther was, therefore, not opposed to confirmation, as some may think, but it is clearly evident that he placed a different emphasis upon it than did the Roman Church and even later Lutheran leaders. "Luther's emphasis on instruction, especially in preparation for the Lord's Supper, is his major contribution to a new type of confirmation."²⁷

Luther never established a new rite for confirmation, but set the stage for what might be considered the beginnings of Lutheran confirmation. Arthur Repp, in his book, Confirmation in the Lutheran Church, has carefully distinguished no less than six major types of confirmation within the Lutheran Church. These different types appeared throughout the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, while in recent times there seems to have been an intermingling with no clearly defined single type being common practice. This has led to the result that tendencies have arisen among Lutheran congregations which make the practice of confirmation instruction traditional to local circumstances rather than upholding its relationship to baptism and Holy Communion as Luther emphasized.

Before we enter into an extended discussion of the relationship of confirmation to baptism and Holy Communion, it would be of value to set forth briefly the several types of confirmation in order to realize the influence that they have left upon our present practices. "The catechetical type arose from the need to prepare Christians for the Lord's Supper. It was not necessarily limited to those contemplating first Communion."²⁸ General education was an important aspect to this particular type of confirmation. While the term confirmation is used it must be remembered that many people were so fearful

²⁶"Preface to the Large Catechism," Book of Concord, Ed. and Trans. by Theodore Tappert (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), p. 360.

²⁷Repp, Confirmation in the Lutheran Church, p. 19.

²⁸Ibid., p. 22.

of falling back into Roman tradition that they greatly hesitated in actually referring to this instruction as confirmation. This method was used extensively throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in educating children and adults. Pastors were required to preach catechetical sermons and many Church orders or Kirchenordnung had little if any liturgical framework surrounding this practice. Parents often took the initiative and responsibility in instructing their children for Holy Communion and after examination by the pastor a child could receive the sacrament.

The second type of confirmation can in fact be said to be the first true rite of confirmation in the Lutheran Church. "The hierarchical type of confirmation which Bucer recommended received its name because of his insistence that the individual should vow his allegiance to Christ through the church."²⁹ Because of this new view by Bucer there began to arise tendencies in the minds of many people regarding admission to Holy Communion and being received into full fellowship of the Church structure. "Bucer added two elements which had not been present in the catechetical approach; a surrender to Christ in the form of a confession of faith and a submission to the discipline of the church, both elements firmed up with a vow. While Holy Baptism and the admission to the Lord's Supper together had an important place, church discipline was really the focal point in Bucer's approach to confirmation."³⁰

A third type of confirmation followed behind the influence of Bucer. This sacramental type was another step closer to the Roman idea that confirmation added something lacking in baptism. This influence along with prayers that began to be used in association with the laying on of hands represented a major portion of the idea that baptism was only a beginning and needed to

²⁹Klos, Confirmation and First Communion. p. 59.

³⁰Repp, Confirmation in the Lutheran Church. p. 36.

be completed in a special rite later on in life. "This view was held by Schleiermacher and was congenial to Pietism. Confirmation thus appears as a renewal of the covenant of baptism. This view stresses the ritual and solemnity of confirmation. Upon analysis, it sometimes indicates a hidden or unconscious distrust of the complete efficacy of infant baptism."³¹

Another type of confirmation can be described as the traditional type. During the sixteenth century many bitter disputes broke out between the Roman Church and the Lutherans. In reaction to the Roman's trying to force a sacramental view upon the Lutherans, the Lutherans began to question the practice of confirmation, and some went so far as to urge no rite of confirmation at all because of a fear that there might be a compromise with the Catholics. Out of these reactions there arose a tendency to associate confirmation just with Holy Baptism and separate confirmation and the Lords' Supper. This form of confirmation has received considerable interest in recent years because of its emphasis upon the separation of confirmation and first communion.³²

The two final types of confirmation appear later in the development of the practice of confirmation. These two final types of confirmation may be classified as the Pietistic and Rationalistic types. They appeared as a result of reactions to conditions within the Church which were becoming undesirable and possibly even rather mechanical. It must be remembered that the Pietistic and Rationalistic types appear about one hundred years and more after the first four types which appeared during the sixteenth century. The period of Orthodoxy between these last two types and the first four is significant because of the formalism which characterized the education and religious thinking of this period of history. Because of this formalism, many lay

³¹Gustav K. Wieneke, "Confirmation in Historical Perspective," The Lutheran Quarterly 7 (May 1955): 113.

³²Repp, Confirmation in the Lutheran Church. p. 55.

people had a difficult time gaining little if any understanding of the Christian faith.

Philip Spener became involved in the Pietistic emphasis upon confirmation because of his understanding of conversion. Reform in the practice of confirmation was inevitable because of the widespread feelings of discontent with catechetical instruction during the period of Orthodoxy. Because of Spener's influence confirmation became a way of renewing the baptismal covenant and giving testimony of one's conversion in the form of a solemn vow. Admission to Holy Communion was based upon one's ability to examine himself to see how much of a faith and understanding he really possessed. The discerning of the body and blood of Christ was also there, but the subjectiveness of one's faith was the unfortunate element which was highlighted during the period of Lutheran pietism.

The last type of confirmation probably has had the most disastrous effects upon theology and the doctrine of the Church. "Once the Pietists had undermined the importance of the Word and sacraments and shifted the emphasis to Christian experience, it was only a matter of time before the intellect replaced both the emotions and the Word and Rationalism began to take over. Under the influence of Rationalism, confirmation grew in importance as Holy Baptism was minimized."³³ Some of the results of the greater emphasis upon confirmation may be generally characterized. For example, the particular day of confirmation tended to become a festival day. Also, the sermon became extraordinarily long and was a highlight of the ceremony. Examinations were separated from the ceremony and value was placed upon them. After the examination had been completed, a person was expected to give a confession of faith. Along with the confession of faith, a person was expected to vow his life in the form of an oath. Much drama was placed upon the swearing of the vow exalting

³³Ibid., pp. 76-77.

it to a place of undue importance. Finally, confirmation was associated with the graduation from school because of certain laws that required a certain amount of education before a person could be confirmed. "As far as the doctrine of the church was concerned, Rationalism whittled it down from a broad theological concept of one universal fellowship in Christ to the denomination, and even further to the particular congregation on a particular corner in town."³⁴

³⁴Klos, Confirmation and First Communion. p. 71.

CHAPTER II

THE STATUS AND SIGNIFICANCE OF LUTHERAN CONFIRMATION

If a person wanted to trace the present day practice of confirmation back to the Reformation, it would be an impossible task because of the various influences which have infiltrated into the Reformer's understanding and concept of Christian education. So many tendencies have influenced the practice of confirmation over the past 450 years that it is indeed difficult to ascertain what really is Lutheran confirmation. Over the years Lutherans have changed it as need and circumstances required. As we have already noticed, they were not always properly concerned about the theological harmony of confessional Lutheranism. Many handicaps and unfortunate ceremonial traits still cling to our present practice of confirmation because of the lasting effects of Pietism and Rationalism. In the actual practice of confirmation in the Lutheran Church it is of extreme importance that we retain the essential attributes of confirmation and recognize the ceremonial customs that have come to be associated with confirmation for what they are; only customs and not to be elevated to positions of overemphasis or distortion.

With that in mind, it is necessary now to investigate three significant ceremonial traits that give credence to the practice and status of confirmation in the Lutheran Church. The three which deserve investigation shape the prominence which we attach to the confirmation rite in the Lutheran Church. It is proposed that the misconceptions surrounding the Confession of Faith, the Vow, and the Imparting of the Holy Spirit have resulted in the unfortunate elevation

of confirmation to a place of significance that de-emphasizes Holy Baptism.

The Confession of Faith

In considering the proper use of a confession of faith at the time of the confirmation rite, it is valuable for us to consider why we stipulate a confession, and how can we use this opportunity for confession without becoming subjective and falling into the trap of judging the genuineness of a person's expression of faith. It is important for us to keep in mind that we are to strive for public confession of faith because the New Testament testifies to it as a fundamental part of the basis for admission into the Church as revealed in repentance and baptism. "Admission into the church, whether by baptism or confirmation, necessarily and Scripturally implies a confession of faith. This is historically true from the New Testament era to the present time."¹ Since we would hopefully agree that the confession of faith is to be encouraged we must consider how then we would attempt to solicit this confession. As confessionally oriented Lutherans, it is hoped that we would discourage any and all attempts to seek what might be considered to be a subjective personal confession of faith. Historically speaking, the Lutheran confession of faith was a means by which a person examined himself in preparation for his first communion. As time went on, an objective confession was replaced by a generally accepted emphasis upon a subjective confession. "The examination was considered the objective phase of the confession, and the answers to the questions required by the rite were thought to be the subjective element. Such interpretations exaggerated the subjective during the pietistic period in the United States, but since then this overemphasis has decreased somewhat. Yet the current

¹Martin T. Ringstrom, "The Significance of the Confirmation Vows." The Augustana Quarterly 17 (1938): 64.

emphasis on functional instruction incurs the danger of a return to pietism."² What we would hope to avoid in the Lutheran Church is an emphasis upon a proof of conversion which would lead to totally un-Lutheran practices emphasizing the ability to decide for Christ, instead of giving all due credit to the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing a person to faith. Johann Michael Reu strongly emphasizes the idea that the Holy Spirit is the instrument of faith, and not a particular program of instruction given by even the very best Christian men and women. "Personal faith in Christ, or the reception of Jesus into the heart and life--the soul laying hold of Him as Saviour, willingly surrendering to Him as Lord and King, participating in the entire life of His flock--cannot be brought about by human instruction and training, but solely by God through His Holy Spirit."³

There is also a tendency on the part of pastors, teachers, and parents to see in some tangible manner whether or not there has really been a change in the life of the catechumen. The examination is one way which has been used to determine to what degree a person understands the truths of the Christian faith. This examination can become a detriment to the on-going life of the church if used to determine the extent of one's faith. If this approach is impressed upon people one cannot avoid the obvious question, "Is the confession of faith a matter of memorization?" To avoid this tendency some pastors have chosen to use a sort of interview in determining the degree of competence in a person's confession of faith. One man has even suggested this approach in order to add to the significance of the occasion of confirmation. "These interviews are held for the purpose of establishing whether that change has really

²Repp, Confirmation in the Lutheran Church. pp. 113-114.

³J. M. Reu, Catechetics, or Theory and Practice of Religious Instruction. (Chicago: Wartburg Publishing House, 1931), 3rd Edition. p. 278.

taken place which the Bible calls the new birth, whether the confirmands personal acceptance of Jesus Christ as Lord and Master is real and earnest."⁴ The confession may also function as a prerequisite for a worthy participation in Holy Communion. It is important to remember that there is and should be a place of importance in the Lutheran rite of confirmation for the confession of faith. It should also be clearly understood why we use the confession, on the basis of Scripture, and to what degree we are able to see the depth of faith in a person who is about to remember what was given to him in baptism, and about to participate in Holy Communion for the first time. If the confession of faith is to be understood in terms of the extent of faith in order to prove the reality of true sanctity, then we are implying that we have the ability to discern, in every case, when the Holy Spirit should properly work faith in a catechumen.

The Vow

"Usually the vow supplemented the confessional content of the statement of faith."⁵ Since the vow was a supplement to the confession of faith, it is well that we clarify what is trying to be accomplished when we ask a person to make a vow as part of the confirmation rite. Popularly, the vow has been used as a way of establishing a lifelong commitment to the Church by those wishing to partake of Holy Communion. This lifelong commitment is significant because much discussion has taken place in the Lutheran Church over the binding nature of the vow. It seems from the demands placed upon confirmands in respect to a lifelong vow that it would be beneficial to re-think what we are expecting from our young people and remove the undesirable character of such an encompassing

22. ⁴O. A. Waech, "Advancing in Evangelism," Advance 1-2 (March 1955):

⁵Repp, Confirmation in the Lutheran Church. p. 114.

promise that needs to be renewed every so often, instead of a decision once and for all. "Theologically we are committed to daily repentance and daily renewal. Continuous commitment is a necessity for Christian faith and life."⁶ What is being emphasized in the pledging of a vow is to be faithful in the use of the means of grace. That includes to be faithful to the covenant that God made with a person at the time of his baptism. "A vow or promise committing the confirmand to a lifelong faith in Christ or loyalty to him contradicts the nature of the faith relationship which is in need of constant renewal. Such a vow is beyond the power of anyone to keep."⁷ One of the criticisms that commonly arises has to do with the strictness of the vow. Can an immature child be expected to promise lifelong allegiance to certain formulations which are still being questioned and discussed by theologians? Fortunately, we seem to be heading in a different direction in our attitude towards the confirmation vow. As an essential part of the confirmation rite the vow should be understood more in terms of a desire to be faithful to the Lord, instead of an absolute promise which has to be decided upon at one particular point in one's early life. "It is true that the Christian should always trust God to keep him steadfast in the true faith, but that does not necessarily imply that he should be required to promise that he will always remain faithful. If such an expression is required, it should rather come as one of conviction and assurance; and not as an absolute promise, which might seem to savor of synergism."⁸ Therefore, it seems appropriate that we should re-examine our rites of confirmation and not impose something upon a child which he might not be ready, if ever, to fully

⁶ Carl W. Sodergren, "Confirmation at What Age?," The Lutheran Companion 105 (April 29, 1959): 8.

⁷ "Communion Before Confirmation?," The Lutheran 44 (July 11, 1962): 16.

⁸ Martin T. Ringstrom, "The Significance of the Confirmation Vows," The Augustana Quarterly 17 (1938): 62.

and completely pledge himself to. It seems more appropriate that we as Christians should seek to help a person remember God's covenant with him in baptism, and allow Christ to guard what He Himself has begun, instead of believing that we as a Church have the competence to require more of a person than to continue to be faithful to his baptismal covenant, with the help of God.

The Laying on of Hands

Another area of concern is the emphasis and understanding placed upon the rite of the laying on of hands after the confession of faith and vow. It is hoped that most people are generally agreed that the laying on of hands is to be primarily understood as a symbolic act. That is to say that this act does not actually mark the beginning of the gift of the Holy Spirit, but only symbolize that a congregation through a pastor is asking God to continue to strengthen what was begun in baptism. We must be very careful not to imply that the Holy Spirit is now being imparted to this child or we run the risk of falling into the trap of believing that baptism needs to be completed at confirmation. The sacramental view of confirmation lays much stress upon this rite and highlights it with a liturgical prayer and the laying on of hands. We must strongly reject this stress of attaching a special significance to this rite, whereby baptism is now completed. Since the laying on of hands is such a prominent feature of Lutheran confirmation, we must be cautious in its use in order not to lead people astray or confuse them theologically. "Confirmation is an act of God which confirms the child in his faith and strengthens him in the God-relation by the renewal and increase of the Holy Spirit. It takes place through the intercessory prayer of the congregation and in the power of the Word of God, of which the ordained pastor is the minister, and not because of some power possessed by a bishop."⁹ This last statement is a good example of an under-

⁹Martin J. Heineken, "Confirmation in Relation to the Lord's Supper," The Lutheran Quarterly 25 (February 1963): 24.

standing of the laying on of hands as an act of God's benediction, not as an impartation of the gift of the Holy Spirit for the first time, or a false conception of the Church that must have a bishop who makes the imparting of grace possible. Another viewpoint of confirmation and the laying on of hands has to do with a confirmation of the privilege, given by the church, to receive the Lord's Supper. "By the laying on of hands, the church, through the pastor, confirms these young confessors in this new privilege and invokes upon them blessing from heaven, that by God's grace they may remain faithful even unto death."¹⁰ It is our intention to explore this idea further, but for the time this should suffice to show that certain emphases may be attached to this rite which are not totally desirable. What is of value and of concern to us is that this particular rite not be viewed in the sacramental way. What is of value for the continued use of this rite is that the congregation has a stake in each confirmand and wants God to sustain him. Therefore, the pastor personalizes the prayers of the congregation by laying on of hands symbolizing where sustaining help comes from.

¹⁰"Confirmation," American Lutheran 28 (February 1945): 17.

CHAPTER III

CONFIRMATION AND CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

Instruction

Another important aspect which arises out of this discussion and study of confirmation has to do with Christian education. If we are to be true to the command of our Lord "to make disciples of all nations, baptizing and teaching them," then it is of vital importance that we properly understand what we are trying to accomplish in our confirmation instruction. It should be noted that the Lutheran Church has always strongly emphasized Christian education. As has been noted earlier, Martin Luther pioneered the stress upon instruction with his catechism. Since that time there have been a number of emphases upon confirmation instruction. One emphasis has to do with a period of instruction leading to a point in which a child is able to confirm the baptismal promise made by his sponsors. Another has to do with a period of instruction that will lead to the ability to make a promise. Still another has to do with some type of concentrated period of instruction in which the instruction itself was deemed more important than the rite. Others have sought to prepare catechumens to receive the Lord's Supper. Finally, there has been an emphasis upon a type of instruction which, in effect, is preparation for church membership. "Regardless of the emphasis given, the rite of confirmation was frequently overemphasized at the expense of the instruction. Where the instruction received the emphasis, perhaps because of it, the impression was often left that Christian education could safely end with confirmation."¹

¹A. C. Repp, "Manual for the Confirmation Instruction of Children," Concordia Theological Monthly 22 (August 1951): 601.

Most people would generally agree that confirmation instruction holds a prominent place in the various activities in a Lutheran Church today. Probably the most serious fault and greatest weakness of confirmation instruction is that more often than not people are left with the impression that confirmation instruction is a terminal thing. Too often we place so much importance upon the rite of confirmation itself that the instruction in the Word of God becomes something secondary to the idea of "getting confirmed." More than anything else it is necessary to dispel the false notions that confirmation carries with it some special magic which perpetuates the idea that "I now know all I need to know for the rest of my life." It is sad but true that so many people are left with that idea that confirmation is a graduation ceremony from Christian education. If confirmation instruction is to remain a vital witness to the life and mission of the church, then it is necessary to impress upon people that confirmation, or any other period in one's life, is not to be considered a terminal point of spiritual growth.

Instead of thinking that confirmation is a completion of one's Christian education we should help people to understand that spiritual growth, and the nurture of it, should be taking place from the time one is born until one dies. The Joint Commission on Confirmation stresses this point when they say, "This process should not be thought of, as it often is, in terms of childhood alone. It is a life-long process."²

Much discussion has taken place in recent years as to the goals of confirmation instruction in the Lutheran Church. Primarily, this has been going on because many people have become more and more aware that much of confirmation instruction has been associated with the understanding of a minimum amount of

²"Communion Before Confirmation?," The Lutheran 44 (July 11, 1962): 17.

knowledge in order to accept the Christian faith as one's own. "Traditionally, confirmation is the process by which this understanding and acceptance take place. This view is reinforced by the common feeling among lay members that confirmation instruction is the place where young people receive their real religious education. Confirmation classes are taught by the pastor or by carefully selected laymen, and these classes provide the opportunity for intensive indoctrination in the beliefs and life patterns of the adult Christian community."³ It is of utmost importance on the basis of recent research done by such people as Repp,⁴ that we guard ourselves against equating instruction with knowledge and understanding. It is a detrimental influence upon the Church when we fail to include a person's understanding, attitude, and behavior in our goals of confirmation instruction, instead of just his intellect. Experience will probably show us that we are failing in our goals of instruction if we are insensitive to the ways of revealing the relationship of Holy Scripture to a child's life. "The post-confirmation dropout problem seems to demonstrate that even our present extensive programs of instruction and indoctrination do not necessarily result in a desire on the part of young people to identify with the adult Christian community."⁵

One of the major goals of confirmation instruction has been, and still is, the preparation of oneself to receive the Lord's Supper. The emphasis upon the preparation for the Lord's Supper has to do with the Scriptural command found in I Corinthians 11:23-30. This Scriptural command implies a sufficient degree of maturity in order to receive the Lord's Supper in a worthy manner. "It is prerequisite, therefore, for participation in the sacrament that a child shall

³ Leonard A. Sibley, "Reaction and Discussion," in Confirmation and Education, ed. W. Kent Gilbert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), p. 124.

⁴ Repp, Confirmation in the Lutheran Church. pp. 197-198.

⁵ Leonard A. Sibley, "Reaction and Discussion," in Confirmation and Education, ed. W. Kent Gilbert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), p. 124.

have reached a sufficient degree of maturity so that he can make a proper confession of faith, so that he will have a sense of sin and will be able to examine himself and thus realize for what it is that the sacrament is to be given him."⁶ In connection with the instruction of a child to receive the Lord's Supper a number of key questions have been raised by numerous people. One such question has to do with the age set for confirmation and receiving of first communion. This is indeed a difficult question and there are at least three suggested proposals which deserve some consideration. One could solve the whole problem and arbitrarily set a certain point in one's instruction as the time one is able to make a choice as the Roman Catholics suggest by using the age of seven. However, the setting of an arbitrary age raises a number of difficulties also. The important aspect in deciding upon a point in which a child is able to partake in a worthy manner has to do with instruction and a confession of faith preceding first communion.

The first proposal has to do with leaving the age for confirmation somewhere around thirteen or fourteen. This is the most common preference of congregations in the Lutheran Church because of the traditions which have surrounded this age level. This age level coincides with the graduation from the eighth grade or junior high school, and thus indirectly marks an end to formal religious instruction. The second proposal has to do with moving the age for confirmation beyond fourteen, possibly as late as age eighteen. Two arguments have been raised in support of this later confirmation. One is that the Church will have more time in which to prepare young people in religious instruction in order to receive the Lord's Supper, and secondly, that a person will be more mature in order to make a lifelong decision for Christ. "The strong emphasis on a lifelong vow had made many, especially among the

⁶ Martin J. Heineken, "Confirmation in Relation to the Lord's Supper," The Lutheran Quarterly 25 (February 1963): 26.

laity, consider a later confirmation age more desirable. The misconception of some that the confirmand is making a major life decision and is in effect making an adult decision when he is not yet an adult has been added inducement to consider an age considerably later than 14 as more desirable."⁷ The third proposal has to do with a complete separation of confirmation and first communion. The Joint Commission on the Theology and Practice of Confirmation made up of fifteen people representing The Lutheran Church in America, The American Lutheran Church, and The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod carefully researched members of the above three church bodies and presented their findings in a report called, Current Concepts and Practices of Confirmation in Lutheran Churches. On the basis of these findings, they then prepared A Report for Study which has been presented for study to the members of the Lutheran Churches named. The invitation to undertake such a study was offered by The Lutheran Church in America. The commission began this important study in 1964. On the basis of their recommendations for study, the following changes have been suggested to the presidents of the Lutheran Church bodies participating in this study. Confirmation and first communion should be separated, therefore allowing eligible children to receive Holy Communion at age ten and to be confirmed towards the end of the tenth grade.⁸ This proposal represents a dramatic change in the idea of confirmation instruction which has significant implications in relation to the life and mission of the Church. "The commission's definition of confirmation states: 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."⁹

⁷Repp, Confirmation in the Lutheran Church. p. 188.

⁸For a complete outline of the commission's recommendations see Joint Commission on the Theology and Practice of Confirmation, A Report for Study.

⁹W. Kent Gilbert, ed., Confirmation and Education, p. 6

Sponsors

Whatever proposal, or combinations of proposals is accepted and used by the Lutheran Church at present or in the near future it is important to emphasize the significance of Christian parents or sponsors in the process of Christian education. Possibly the Church has been too eager to take over a responsibility that Christian parents and sponsors assume at the baptism of their children. The Church does indeed have a responsibility to its baptized members regardless of the fact that parents may shirk their responsibility and assume that the Church is to provide for the religious instruction of children. In order to revitalize a long-standing practice such as confirmation instruction, it would indeed be advantageous to promote a renewed interest among Lutheran parents and sponsors of the benefits that their support and active participation would realize. It is evident from the above proposals and the increase in discussion surrounding confirmation that the Church is struggling with possibilities that will have a profound effect upon the way we view our mission and ministries in the years to come. The Joint Commission on the Theology and Practice of Confirmation has presented one alternative that is specifically addressed to the needs and areas of improvement in the practice of Lutheran confirmation. This alternative seeks to promote a view of confirmation that would encourage a uniform practice of confirmation among three major Lutheran Church bodies. They are attempting to speak in a constructive way to a practice which has no biblical mandate, but which does in fact permeate the very heart and soul of the educational ministry of the Lutheran Church.

One area to which they address themselves is the emphasis upon encouraging sponsors to take an active part in the confirmation process. This idea stresses the importance of adult concern in order to help a young person become

strengthened in his spiritual development. It could also be a way of providing spiritual assistance to help children who lack parental guidance to be nurtured in the process of religious education. "The suggestion by the commission of having sponsors for the confirmands is a practical way of strengthening the emphasis in the definition of confirmation on the youth's identification with the adult Christian community."¹⁰ This suggestion also encourages educational programs for adults who will serve as sponsors thereby creating opportunity for adults to witness to their faith and become involved in a personal way in the educational responsibilities of the Church. If the Church as a whole wishes to implement this approach the sponsors can be used to guide the child as he prepares to receive his first communion. Whether these sponsors be the parents themselves, baptismal sponsors, or Christian adults assigned by the pastor they will attempt to set an example for the child and guide him as he receives the Lord's Supper, and nurture him for confirmation later in his life. Whether we accept the suggestion of an early communion age or not it is difficult not to see the value of sponsors for the religious development of a child.

Christian parents, above all, need to be reminded of the resources that they possess as possibly being the greatest single influence upon a child's confirmation instruction and the years after he has been confirmed. The Church needs to be reminded that it is there to help parents meet their responsibilities which they assumed at baptism. "There is no substitute for Christian nurture in the home and in the Church."¹¹ In providing Christian teaching for a child it is the responsibility of the Church to help parents relate God's Word to their daily lives, so that by their example they will begin to build that foundation

¹⁰ Klos, Confirmation and First Communion. pp. 172-173.

¹¹ Carl W. Sodergren, "Christian Nurture Continuous...Confirmation at What age?", The Lutheran Companion 105 (April 29, 1959): 8.

of faith that is so important in the life of a child. "Both pastor and parents want to be God's instruments in developing a deeper appreciation for the Word and Sacraments and give opportunities for the child to grow in his Christian experiences in worship."¹² The faith-life of a child depends upon the cooperation and contributions which Christian parents and a Christian congregation are willing to offer to a developing young child. "This is a job which parents and the Church may shirk only at the peril of their own salvation and the salvation of those who are dear to them."¹³

Congregational Participation

It is obvious from the importance that Lutheran congregations place upon confirmation that they do indeed realize a responsibility to be concerned about the religious instruction of young people. However, it should be noted that congregations are not always clear on their responsibilities because of the plaguing problem of spiritual delinquency among an alarming number of youth and adults. In this respect two questions arise which warrant our attention. First, how far does the congregation go in meeting its educational responsibilities? Secondly, what can the congregation offer as far as education to meet the needs of its youth and adults? These are questions which are not easily answered, but a number of suggestions have been offered to help solve at least some of the educational responsibilities of a congregation. "Perhaps the most important task that lies before us in getting the congregation to assume its responsibility for the continued spiritual growth of its youth is to instruct it in the proper meaning of confirmation and to help it in gaining a more Scriptural understanding of Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper."¹⁴

¹²M. L. Koehneke, "We Aim to Please the Lord," The Lutheran Witness 71 (Sept. 2, 1952): 4.

¹³Carl W. Sodergren, "Christian Nature Continuous...Confirmation at What Age?," The Lutheran Companion 105 (April 29, 1959): 8.

¹⁴Repp, Confirmation in the Lutheran Church. p. 206.

One way to ensure the continued spiritual growth of youth and adults is to realize the need for a variety of Christian education programs that speak to their needs. Before any of this can happen, of course, it is necessary for a congregation to realize that confirmation instruction is not something terminal. Unless this attitude is dispelled from the minds of people, there will be no reason to continue education because it is assumed that all the education one needs was received during confirmation instruction. It must be emphasized that confirmation is not an end to the spiritual growth of any Christian. "Growing in the knowledge of the Lord is a process that extends through life."¹⁵

If, therefore, the goal of religious instruction is to help people grow in grace throughout their entire lives, then it is necessary for a congregation to be keenly aware of the near unlimited opportunities that are available from birth till death to be about the business of providing spiritual growth. Since this study is basically directed toward one aspect of religious instruction, namely confirmation instruction, then it seems logical that if this important stage in a person's life were properly nurtured then there could be a smooth flow into need for lifelong growth. If this could be cultivated in the home and in the congregation, there might not be such a marked rise in delinquency especially during the complicated transitional years of a person's shift towards adulthood.

During a young person's transition from childhood into adolescence, a congregation needs to provide stimulating religious instruction that will not only prepare a person for his confirmation day, but also prepare him for the Christian vocation as a member of Christ's Church. Three emphases need to be remembered if a congregation hopes to integrate a young person into the life

¹⁵Alton F. Wedel, "Basic Fallacies About Confirmation," The Lutheran Witness 80 (March 21, 1961): 7.

and mission of the Church. First, a congregation needs to provide religious education which will help a person function as a vital member of the Church in and among the ever widening associations that a young person grows into as he matures. Secondly, a young person needs religious education that will help him understand the Christian view of sex and marriage and how to look forward to choosing a marriage partner. Thirdly, young Christians need to be guided and instructed towards considering and planning for their life vocations. "To keep adolescents close to the church, emphasis should be placed on actually accepting and treating them as members."¹⁶ This point alone has been neglected to the degree that young people feel little attachment if any to the value of continuing their Christian education past the confirmation age. Congregations should attempt to make the young Christians feel needed, wanted, and accepted. Adolescents might also be encouraged to serve as representatives of the congregation in order to visit and make contact with their own peers as part of certain congregational committees. How else will a congregation be able to properly prepare its young Christians without encouraging them to begin assuming positions of responsibility and leadership early in their lives?

The Joint Commission on the Theology and Practice of Confirmation has prepared a definition of confirmation which seeks to redefine how a young Christian may become integrated into the life and mission of the Church. "This is a call for Christian education well beyond what most Lutheran congregations have been providing in their confirmation efforts. Such education is a process of socialization in which the individual becomes part of a community that believes its youth must continue the purpose but transcend the patterns of the past."¹⁷ The importance of the definition and Report for

¹⁶ Repp, Confirmation in the Lutheran Church. p. 209.

¹⁷ C. Richard Evenson, "The Purpose of Confirmation Education," in Confirmation and Education, ed. W. Kent Gilbert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), p. 45.

Study by the commission should not be overlooked simply because the practical considerations may cause confusion among the congregations of the Lutheran Church. "However, its implications show a dynamic effect upon the entire style of the congregation and upon the educational efforts undertaken by such a congregation."¹⁸

¹⁸Ibid., p. 50.

CHAPTER IV

THE RELATIONSHIP OF CONFIRMATION TO BAPTISM AND HOLY COMMUNION

One of the most vital issues in a study of confirmation is the focus upon confirmation in relation to baptism and Holy Communion. This is necessary in order that the Lutheran Church refrain from investing the practice of confirmation with any sacramental tendencies that elevate it to an importance that completes Holy Baptism. As has been noted earlier, confirmation came to be understood as a sealing with the Spirit by means of chrismation immediately after baptism. Much later, the Roman Catholics separated baptism from confirmation and elevated confirmation to the level of a sacrament because of the imparting of the Holy Spirit at confirmation. The Reformation marked a turning point with the Romans' view of confirmation as a sacrament. For many years confirmation was not even practiced in much of Lutheranism. When it was reintroduced into Lutheranism, it began to take on an emphasis which again led to the impression that a certain grace was bestowed in confirmation, thus completing baptism. G. W. H. Lampe lists two achievements of the Reformation which helped to place confirmation in a proper perspective. "The first achievement of the Reformers was to restore in full and unequivocally the ancient and proper significance of Baptism in its positive aspect as the sacrament of the bestowal of the Spirit. The second, and more successful, reform was the relating of Confirmation to infant Baptism in such a way as to make it the means of supplying the response of faith which is required in Baptism but cannot be made in the case of infants."¹

¹Lampe, The Seal of the Spirit. pp. 312-313.

Since the Reformation many traditions have been built up around confirmation which have led to the impression that confirmation is more important than baptism. Whatever impression one has grown up with concerning confirmation it is important to keep reminding youth and adults that confirmation does not complete baptism, but only calls it to remembrance. It is also important to educate people to the fact that confirmation is not an essential practice in the Church and our use of it must not lead people to believe that the importance we attach to it lies in the rite. The primary emphasis of confirmation is in the instruction in the Word which precedes the rite. "Here the real confirmation takes place, the confirmation of the faith by the Word. Here God continues to confirm the faith begun in Baptism and nurtured by the home and the church."²

Another disturbing element which still clings to the rite of confirmation has to do with the renewal of the baptismal covenant. The serious misunderstandings which are perpetuated in the Lutheran Church concerning the idea that a person is in a position to make a bargain with God reveals the need for a review of confirmation. The covenant which God establishes with an infant at baptism never needs any type of renewal on the part of the baptized person. A person, through the work of the Holy Spirit, merely accepts God's covenant of grace and thereby goes along with God's covenant relationship.³ Every time people in the Lutheran Church continue to seek a renewal of the baptismal covenant from another group of confirmands, we are doing a disservice to Scripture, and we are not properly understanding the use of the means of grace. What then, is the purpose of confirmation in relation to baptism?

Since confirmation is a human institution it has been subject to abuse

² Arthur C. Repp, "The Theological Implications of Confirmation," Concordia Theological Monthly 31 (April 1960): 233.

³ Repp, Confirmation in the Lutheran Church. p. 157.

and much has been attached to it since the time of the Reformation. Without oversimplifying a prominent tradition in the Lutheran Church, one can say that confirmation is instruction. "Confirmation is the instruction of the baptized in the covenant of Baptism. A baptized Christian's confirmation day is nothing more and nothing less than his personal response to the grace of God in Baptism, the same response that will be his daily habit as he walks with Christ through life."⁴

Since confirmation is basically instruction in the Word of God through the covenant relationship of God, a person is in a process of remembering his entire life. The confirmation rite is just one point of remembrance in the life of a Christian. The confirmation rite is valuable in the sense that a person gives testimony to his covenant relationship with God in a public ceremony. The congregation witnesses this remembrance and is reminded of their responsibility to continue to nurture every member of the body of Christ. "At confirmation the young Christian gives merely his personal affirmation of the covenant which God made with him at the time of his baptism and so reaffirms that he will live in that covenant. This affirmation is part of his continuous concern. Until he dies the Christian undertakes through Word and sacraments to remain true to the baptismal covenant and in faith to mortify the flesh."⁵ Any additions to this remembrance in the form of a renewal of the baptismal covenant would be a serious misunderstanding of Scripture. The pietistic influences that still cling to confirmation attempt to diminish the proper relationship of confirmation to baptism.

The next important area of study has to do with the relationship of confirmation to Holy Communion. Confirmation as we know it today cannot in

⁴ Alton F. Wedel, "Basic Fallacies About Confirmation," The Lutheran Witness 80 (March 21, 1961): 7.

⁵ Repp, Confirmation in the Lutheran Church. p. 160.

any way be traced back to the New Testament because there just are not any roots of a confirmation, as we know it. "The current practice of Confirmation was instituted in Hessen, Germany, at the time of the Reformation, as a compromise with the Anabaptists, at the suggestion of Martin Bucer. This institution has served the Church well, for it was a rational approach to the First Communion. The Catechumens were instructed and then permitted to make their Communion. And yet, this Lutheran tradition was not, nor can it be, quite satisfactory."⁶ From the influence that Martin Bucer attached to confirmation there was created the idea that a person must be confirmed before he can receive Holy Communion. This influence made an insistence upon a person first being instructed and confirmed before he is eligible to receive Holy Communion. Attached later to this idea was the insistence upon "outward signs" in order to prove a person's state of conversion as a further eligibility requirement for Holy Communion. Therefore, the practice of confirmation as done today continues to nourish the idea that confirmation instruction and a public rite must precede Holy Communion. One would be quite correct in saying that there are no Scriptural commands for confirmation, and that there is nothing Scriptural that requires confirmation prior to receiving Holy Communion. Every baptized person has the right to receive Holy Communion because of the Lutheran understanding of God's free grace. "The preparation for the Lord's Supper has been historically one of the major goals of confirmation, and as such this sacrament is the second sacramental pole."⁷ However, confirmation is not a mandatory practice but is a practice developed in order to help fulfill the responsibilities associated with baptism and to fulfill the preparatory implications required by St. Paul for participation in the Lord's Supper.

⁶ Berthold von Schenk, "Confirmation and First Communion," Una Sancta 14 (Pentecost 1957): 3.

⁷ Arthur C. Repp, "The Theological Implications of Confirmation," Concordia Theological Monthly 31 (April 1960): 227.

In order to gain a proper understanding of confirmation it is necessary to examine the Scriptural requirements for a worthy participation in the Lord's Supper. Arthur Repp lists two Scriptural requirements for a worthy participation in the Lord's Supper. The first requirement has to do with the ability of a person wishing to receive communion to be able to actually comprehend the difference between the bread and wine of communion, and ordinary bread and wine. He must be able to distinguish that the bread and wine of communion is the body and blood of Christ. Secondly, a person must have a certain amount of knowledge of his sinfulness in order to accept in faith that which is received in Holy Communion.⁸ A problem arises in our understanding of the sacrament of Holy Communion when we insist that participation in the Lord's Supper depends upon the act of confirmation. However, it should be obvious that a baptized Christian must be able to examine himself, not only for his first communion, but every participation that follows from then on, and that does require a certain amount of maturity on the part of the communicant.

Much discussion has taken place in the Lutheran Church concerning a separation of confirmation and first communion. Not only is there a desire for this separation but there is the suggestion to allow baptized children to receive the Lord's Supper at an earlier age, and delay confirmation until much later. The major argument for this concept seems to be that no one has the right to withhold the Lord's Supper from a baptized child who is able to express his faith in Jesus Christ. Obviously, some instruction would take place prior to a child's first communion, but the Lord's Supper would not be post-poned until a period of formal instruction and the completion of a public ceremony. This concept of confirmation instruction is, of course, quite different from what is currently the common practice in most Lutheran congregations. However, just because this concept is radically different from what we are familiar with should not mean

⁸Ibid., p. 228.

that we object to it and dismiss it without giving it a fair hearing. This concept of early communion is in fact a return to the views of Martin Luther and much of Lutheranism prior to the introduction of a confirmation practice introduced by Martin Bucer. Even though Luther was not concerned with confirmation, he was very concerned with a form of instruction that would prepare children and adults for a worthy partaking of the Lord's Supper. Martin Luther's view of a worthy participation in the Lord's Supper has to do with faith. "This, now, is the preparation required of a Christian for receiving this sacrament worthily. Since this treasure is fully offered in the words, it can be grasped and appropriated only by the heart. Such a gift and external treasure cannot be seized with the hand. Fasting and prayer and the like may have their place as an external preparation and children's exercise so that one's body may behave properly and reverently toward the body and blood of Christ. But what is given in and with the sacrament cannot be grasped and appropriated by the body. This is done by the faith of the heart which discerns and desires this treasure."⁹

If we, therefore, agree that the only prerequisite to a worthy participation in the Lord's Supper has to do with properly discerning the body and blood of Christ, then the question arises as to when can we offer the sacrament of Holy Communion to baptized children? This is a question that is not easily answered and there are arguments which can be cited in defense of almost any age which one is inclined to take. "One might conceivably receive the Sacrament of the Altar at a time earlier than the public act of confirmation. One could make a good theological case for this. In any case there is no essential reason why the confirmation rite must be regarded as preliminary to admission to the Lord's Supper. To be sure, those who are admitted to the Lord's Table must be

⁹The translation is taken from The Book of Concord, trans. and ed. by Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), pp. 450-451.

given an opportunity to understand that which they do, so they may examine themselves as they participate in the sacrament."¹⁰ It is indeed difficult to precisely speak of an age for first communion prior to confirmation that will capture the essence of faith which is required to properly prepare oneself for a worthy participation in the Lord's Supper.

The present practice of confirmation instruction and preparation for Holy Communion in the Lutheran Church often has been guilty of placing too much emphasis upon a measurable amount of faith which can be revealed during a confirmation examination. This is a handicap which the Lutheran Church has gradually allowed to permeate into the "essentials" of confirmation instruction which raises the standard of what is necessary for participation in the Lord's Supper. Even if the Church is ready to focus its attention upon faith instead of the degree of knowledge, it still has to solve the question: How much knowledge is necessary?¹¹ Whether or not changes will be made in the years to come concerning the admission of baptized children to receive the Lord's Supper must be based upon the proper understanding of Scripture and the correct understanding of the sacraments. "It is prerequisite, therefore, for participation in the sacrament that a child shall have reached a sufficient degree of maturity so that he can make a proper confession of faith, so that he will have a sense of sin and will be able to examine himself and thus realize for what it is that the sacrament is to be given him."¹²

¹⁰Roy Enquist, "The Theology of Confirmation," Proceedings of the Third Annual Conference of Lutheran Youth Workers (February 19-21, 1963): 14.

¹¹Arthur Repp, "The Theological Implications of Confirmation," Concordia Theological Monthly 31 (April 1960): 228.

¹²Martin Heineken, "Confirmation in Relation to the Lord's Supper," The Lutheran Quarterly 25 (February 1963): 26.

Membership into What?

It should be clear from the previous discussion of confirmation in relation to baptism that there is not something completed in confirmation that was begun in baptism. However, there is another aspect of confirmation which continues to lead to confusion; namely, that confirmation is somehow an entrance into the Church. "Martin Bucer, in Hessen, at the time of the Reformation, wanted to take the wind out of the sails of the Baptists and Anabaptists and therefore, invented a Christian Congregation into which one does not gain entrance through Baptism, but through instruction and Confirmation."¹³ Unfortunately, this idea still has a place in Lutheran congregations that imply that a person becomes more of a member by reason of confirmation than he was at baptism. Congregations may use the term "communicant member" for the sake of organization, but there should be no implying that a person gains a better quality of membership in the Church on account of confirmation. If impressions are planted in the minds of people that the real members of the Church are those who have been confirmed, and the baptized members are only potential members, then we are not being true to Scripture which makes it clear that there is only one membership into the body of Christ--baptism. "When a baptized child is led to believe that his membership in the Lutheran Church begins with confirmation, a serious confusion is created. Even when in theory it is stated that while his membership began with Baptism, he now makes public acknowledgment of the fact, we confuse the issue for him and the congregation in attendance. Why ask him, 'Do you desire to be a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and of this congregation?' at confirmation when he has already been a member since his baptism."¹⁴

¹³Berthold von Schenk, "Confirmation and First Communion," Una Sancta 14 (Pentecost 1957): 4.

¹⁴Repp, Confirmation in the Lutheran Church. pp. 161-162.

What are we Confirming?

One of the lingering difficulties with the present practice of confirmation has to do with the idea of confirming the baptismal covenant. This stems from the notion that baptism did not accomplish enough and needs confirming as a complement. "The thought of a renewal of the baptismal covenant, it will be remembered, was introduced into confirmation by the Pietists and their forerunners. They were interested in a pure congregation within the church (ecclesiola in ecclesia), and the renewal of the baptismal covenant was part of their conversion theology."¹⁵ Because of this long-standing misunderstanding on the part of many Lutherans, the confirmation rite becomes the highpoint of one's Christian life, instead of Holy Baptism. If this practice of completing baptism is still promoted in the Lutheran Church, then we should move towards review and possibly even reform. Instead of saying that confirmation completes baptism, we should instead be saying that confirmation gives one an opportunity to remember what took place at baptism. On the basis of instruction a person would be able to recall and affirm what was given to him in baptism. This is what we should be confirming in every Lutheran congregation.

It should be clear to all Lutherans that confirmation is not a sacrament through which we join the Church. Nor can we ever consider confirmation to be more important than Holy Baptism. "Confirmation is the instruction of the baptized in the covenant of Baptism. It is a period of preparation for the second Sacrament, the Holy Eucharist, when through the Word the child is readied for this joyful feast of thanks and its soul-sustaining power. A baptized Christian's confirmation day is nothing more and nothing less than his personal response to the grace of God in Baptism, the same response that will be his

¹⁵Ibid., p. 159.

daily habit as he walks with Christ through life."¹⁶ The confirming that takes place on a particular confirmation day has to do with a personal identification by the confirmand of the gifts he received in baptism. "It is the purpose of Confirmation basically to identify the meaning of salvation and forgiveness and deliverance so that one may then consciously share in the new eternal life which God gives us in Jesus Christ. This is the content of the church's message in our time and in all time. What we are dealing with here is nothing less than the fullness of the Gospel itself: Forgiveness, deliverance, new life, eternal salvation; gifts which are given to us by grace alone through Baptism."¹⁷

Is Confirmation Essential for Receiving
Holy Communion?

One of the traditional purposes of confirmation is that it prepares one to receive the Lord's Supper. This instructional period is very important to the Scriptural understanding of being able to discern the body and blood of Christ. However, this instructional preparation is often confused in such a way that it is made equal to the right to partake of the Lord's Supper. If one places this right on the same level as other church rights and uses it to decide who may or may not receive communion, then we misunderstand the doctrine of baptism. "The Christian received the right to take communion when he was baptized. The relating of this to other church rights is unrealistic as they cannot be placed on the same level. The bestowal of a general right to partake of the Lord's Supper must therefore be removed from the liturgies."¹⁸ Confirmation,

¹⁶ Alton F. Wedel, "Basic Fallacies about Confirmation," The Lutheran Witness 80 (March 21, 1961): 7.

¹⁷ Roy Enquist, "The Theology of Confirmation," Proceedings of the Third Annual Conference of Lutheran Youth Workers (February 19-21, 1963): 14.

¹⁸ Kurt Frör, "Confirmation: A Lutheran World Federation Seminar," The Lutheran World 8 (September 1961): 179.

with all of its different influences, does serve a good purpose in the Church. It is the duty of the Church to instruct its members from baptism onward. The instruction received prior to confirmation is of extreme importance. However, there is one practice which is being questioned by more increasing numbers of people. That has to do with the view that confirmation must precede first communion.

The argument which supports a separation of confirmation and first communion puts much emphasis upon the fact that all baptized Christians have the right to partake of the Lord's Supper, and it should not be denied them for such a long time, i.e., until a child is fourteen or fifteen. This viewpoint has much support and a good theological case could be made for it. The opposing view is that participation in the Lord's Supper should follow confirmation because the receiving of the Lord's Supper is such a reverent practice that it should be reserved for those who can demonstrate the ability to examine themselves. "Because the Lord's Supper is a corporate sacrament, the congregation is concerned about the spiritual maturity of every participant, especially at his first Communion."¹⁹

¹⁹Arthur C. Repp, "The Theological Implications of Confirmation," Concordia Theological Monthly 31 (April 1960): 230.

CONCLUSION

It should be apparent that there has been much concern over the practice of confirmation in the Lutheran Church. Especially, has there been renewed objections toward the common practice of requiring confirmation before one can receive the Lord's Supper. At the present time, the Joint Commission on the Theology and Practice of Confirmation has recommended that The Lutheran Church in America, The American Lutheran Church, and The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod adopt its report as a guide in revitalizing the practice of confirmation, especially directed toward separating confirmation and first communion.

"The joint study was undertaken to foster greater uniformity among North American Lutheran church bodies on the age of confirmation and admission to the Lord's Supper. Both The American Lutheran Church and The Lutheran Church in America have approved the report and recommendations as a guide for their confirmation ministry."¹ Also, in this same respect, The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod has had two differing recommendations on the Report of the Joint Commission on the Theology and Practice of Confirmation to the Milwaukee convention. The Report of the Board of Parish Education concludes that, "This divergence in confirmation practice has been evident in every survey of confirmation practices made. Adopting the report of the Joint Commission would provide guidelines moving the Synod toward a more unified practice."² The Commission on Theology and Church Relations also presented its recommendations to the

¹The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod, Convention Manual of the Forty-Ninth Regular Convention (1971): 347.

²Ibid.

Milwaukee convention. They resolved the following: "That at this time The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod encourage the retention of its present emphasis on the values of combining confirmation and first Communion."³ In the actual voting on these recommendations a resolution was adopted, To Urge Congregations to Evaluate Their Present Practice. This means that the Missouri Synod still wants to study further the suggestion of separating confirmation and first communion, while continuing with the present accepted practice.

It is evident from the resolution passed by The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod in Milwaukee that further study is required before any changes or suggestion of changes are carried out on a large scale. The Joint Commission feels that there has been a sufficient amount of time for the study and evaluation of its recommendations. The guidelines are presented in order to best help the Church move towards a more uniform practice of confirmation because of the changing needs of the Church.

Whatever course of action is finally settled upon, it is important to remember three essentials which testify clearly to the proper practice of confirmation in the Lutheran Church. First, if we can remember how valuable confirmation becomes when we use it as a means of instruction in the Word, then we will not neglect our Reformation heritage as Lutherans. Secondly, with this foundation of Christian instruction, a child will be fully equipped to make a confession of faith that reaffirms the significance of his baptism. Finally, the Lutheran congregation is reminded of its responsibility to continue to nurture the faith of all of its members. With these three essentials kept well in focus, the proper practice of confirmation in the Lutheran Church will continue to contribute to the goal of developing and nurturing the faith-lives of many more children.

³Ibid., 43.

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