

6-1-1971

First Communion and Confirmation

Berthold von Schenk
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm>



Part of the [Practical Theology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

von Schenk, Berthold (1971) "First Communion and Confirmation," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 42, Article 38.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol42/iss1/38>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Theological Monthly by an authorized editor of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

First Communion and Confirmation

BERTHOLD VON SCHENK

The author is pastor emeritus of Our Saviour Lutheran Church in the Bronx, N. Y.

THE DECISION CONCERNING THE RIGHT AGE FOR FIRST COMMUNION IS THE PREROGATIVE of the pastor in the setting of his congregation. Every baptized child of God should receive the sacramental grace imparted in Holy Communion.

One of the critical issues before The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod at its convention in Milwaukee this summer will be the questions of when children should receive their first Communion and when they should be confirmed. This complex problem was the subject of a major study, supported by the three major Lutheran bodies, leading to the proposal that first Communion should be offered to children in the fifth grade and confirmation should be postponed till the sophomore year in high school. The Lutheran Church in America and The American Lutheran Church have both voted to adopt the recommendations of the committee. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod will vote on this recommendation at Milwaukee. The Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is recommending that the Synod continue its traditional practice of offering confirmation and first Communion to children at the end of their eighth grade. However, the Board for Parish Education of the Synod is recommending that the Synod adopt the joint Lutheran report that would admit them to Holy Communion earlier and confirm them later. Comprehensive and exhaustive as the original study was, and as carefully thought out as the contradictory resolutions are, it seems to the present writer that several aspects of confirmation and first Communion were overlooked and

need to be stressed so that the vote at Milwaukee may accurately reflect the ancient tradition of the church with respect to first Communion and confirmation.

Let us look first at the history of both Communion and confirmation in the New Testament and in the early church. The first point the New Testament makes is that the proper understanding of Holy Communion flows out of a proper understanding of the church. The early fathers consistently defined the church as the eucharistic community gathered under the direction of the bishop to manifest the total presence of Christ, especially in the celebration of the Holy Communion. The Augsburg Confession catches the spirit of the New Testament when it defines the church as "the assembly of saints in which the Gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly." (Article VII)

Until the third century the word 'church' (*ecclesia*) means . . . the solemn assembly for the liturgy, and by extension those who have a right to take part in this. There were of course plenty of other meetings of groups of christians in one another's houses for prayer and edification and for the *agape* or 'Lord's supper' (not to be confused with the eucharist). But these gatherings were never called '*ecclesia*,' . . . but *syneleusis* or 'meetings.' The distinction between them lay partly in the corporate all-inclusive nature of the *ecclesia*, which every christian had a right and a

duty to attend; whereas the *synelenseis* were groups of christian friends and acquaintances But above all what distinguished the liturgical *ecclesia* from even the largest private meeting was the official presence of the *liturgical* ministry, the bishop, presbyters and deacons, and their exercise there of those special 'liturgical' functions in which they were irreplaceable.¹

Luther correctly called the New Testament "the book of the Holy Communion." Surprisingly, there are few descriptions in the New Testament of what the primitive church did when they were gathered as the *ecclesia*, the body of Christ, except for the cultic description in Acts 2:42, "They met constantly to hear the apostles teach [the sermon], and shared a common life [fellowship, the collective giving and offering], to break bread and to pray." It was in worship, in doing the liturgy of Word and Sacrament, that the Holy Spirit was given the opportunity to enlighten the worshiper with His gifts, to sanctify and keep him in the one faith. In this *ecclesia*, the Holy Spirit cannot be fenced in by man-made rules or restrictions. Again, Luther has caught a significant New Testament insight when he writes, "In this Christian church He [the Holy Spirit] daily and abundantly forgives all sins."

In similar fashion, the New Testament emphasizes the oneness of the church. Again, a prayer from the early church reflects this point of view clearly. In the *Didache*, where we find the oldest surviving liturgy, this offertory prayer occurs:

. . . as this piece [of bread] was scattered over the hills and then was brought to-

gether and made one, so let your church be brought together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom. For yours is the glory and power through Jesus Christ forever. (9:4)

There is no stress on individuals in the eucharistic community, in the *sanctorum communio*, when they do their liturgy. The church at worship is one loaf. The *ecclesia* is made up of many kernels, but when the members of the body of Christ meet for worship, according to the New Testament, the individual becomes part of the whole. The *ecclesia* knows of no individualism.

From this it follows that if we understand what the church, the *ecclesia*, is, there will be no doubt as to whether children should also receive the divine gifts of the Holy Spirit in the *ecclesia*. When we understand that true worship is the means by which the Holy Spirit bestows His gifts, then we will also understand that no church organization has the right to tell children that they must wait until they can eat and drink worthily by the standards that the church has itself created, and only after a period of instruction and the renewal of the vows that they made at their baptism. It seems to the present writer that if the full liturgy is denied a baptized child of God, we are committing the mortal sin of "despising the little ones."

Another characteristic emphasis in the New Testament is that the proper understanding of church and of Holy Communion is intimately connected to the proper understanding of the nature and authority of the ministerial office. The minister is to be regarded by the congregation as the steward of the mysteries of God (1 Cor.

¹ Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1947), pp. 19—20.

4:1), that is, as the person who bears full responsibility and authority for the proper sacramental life of the congregation. As such he is not the popularly elected leader of a democratic group gathering for worship, meals, and other activities. He is the appointed steward of the mysteries of God and is directly and personally responsible for their proper administration, according to the words of institution.

St. Ignatius of Antioch, who died as a martyr sometime after A. D. 110, summed up the Biblical understanding of church, Holy Communion, and ministry when he wrote:

Be careful, then, to observe a single eucharist. For there is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, and one cup of his blood that makes us one, and one altar, just as there is one bishop along with the presbytery and the deacons, my fellow slaves. In that way whatever you do is in line with God's will. (Philadelphians 4:1)

In his letter to the Ephesians he writes that those who fail to join in the worship life of the community show their arrogance and deprive themselves of God's bread (5:2 f.). Elsewhere he states flatly that the presence of the bishop is required for a valid eucharist. "Where the bishop is present, there let the congregation gather, just as where Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic church. Without the bishop's supervision, no baptisms or love feasts are permitted." (Smyrneans 8:2)

While it is true that the New Testament says nothing about confirmation, it does contain some of the roots out of which the rite of confirmation developed in the life of the church. It would seem that Luther overlooked these New Testament roots when he tended to regard confirmation

with low esteem. For example, he places this rite on a level with the dedication of a bell, or in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* he describes it as a "sacramental ceremony" on the level with other ceremonies, "such as the blessing of water and the like."

One of the New Testament roots of confirmation is found in the apostolic practice of the laying on of hands. This practice has always played a significant role in the religious history of God's people. It was practiced in the Old Testament for various purposes. Christ Himself laid on hands in different ways for purposes of healing and benediction. It was adopted into the life of the church for these same functions (Acts 9:17). It was likewise employed after baptism, and it became especially significant in conferring an office or assignment in the service of the church (Acts 6:6; 13:3). Out of this practice arose the rite of ordination in which special grace, accompanied by the gift of the Spirit, was communicated to an individual by the laying on of hands (1 Tim. 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6). We should note in passing that this special gift of the Spirit, granted by the laying on of hands, came only to those who already possessed the Spirit.

The concept of "sealing" in the New Testament should also be noted in a discussion of New Testament roots for confirmation. Thus the writer to the Ephesians says:

In Christ you also, who have heard the Word of truth, the Gospel of your salvation, and have believed in Him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, which is the guarantee of your inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of His glory. (Eph. 1:13 ff.)

2 Cor. 1:22 carries another strong statement concerning the sealing by the Spirit. "It is God also who has set His seal upon us, and as a pledge of what is to come has given the Spirit to dwell in our hearts."

Clearly, the laying on of hands and the act of sealing have value in the New Testament as sacramentals. Through such rites the Holy Spirit operates. We do not mean thereby to argue that the laying on of hands or the sealing rites which we have called precursors of confirmation sacramentally understood are essential to salvation. We are not now discussing the question of salvation. We think of many who have been saved, even without baptism, such as the thief on the cross. Rather our concern is that confirmation be understood in the light of certain Biblical practices and thus be given a position of greater, rather than lesser, honor and importance in the sacramental life of the church.

We should be aware of the fact that the earliest church had a "rite of confirmation" in which the newly baptized person was sealed by the bishop, usually with chrism and the sign of the cross on the forehead. At the same time the bishop laid his hands on the newly baptized person. In many cases this newly baptized person was an adult, but there is evidence from the earliest days that this practice was also followed with respect to children. A newly baptized person, then, immediately took part in the celebration of the Holy Communion. This applied also to infants, who received the intincted bread from the hand of the bishop. This practice has been continued to this day in the Greek Orthodox Church.

In the subsequent history of the church, both first Communion and confirmation

underwent distinct historical developments. We do not mean to imply that all historical development is invalid, but we do suggest that the church needs to recognize those customs and ideas which are the product of historical development and those which are not. As we have already mentioned, for example, Martin Luther wished to play down the sacramental significance of confirmation. The report of the joint confirmation study commission perpetuates this view of Luther, despite its evident intention to restore confirmation to a more proper place in the life of the church. One wishes that the commissioners had taken the Biblical roots and the theological history of confirmation more seriously. Their report failed to build a theologically meaningful understanding of confirmation and thus contributes to the continuing misunderstanding of confirmation which came into the Lutheran tradition under the influence of Martin Bucer and Philip Spener. The research of Carl Paul Caspari has demonstrated that the father of the evangelical understanding and practice of confirmation was Martin Bucer. He saw the rite of confirmation as an effective device to handle the Anabaptists who deprecated infant baptism. Confirmation, so to speak, enabled Bucer both to eat his cake and to have it. Confirmation made it possible for Bucer to continue the custom of infant baptism, for confirmation served as the Lutheran equivalent to the "believer's baptism" of the Anabaptists. In the churches that Bucer influenced, a creedal confession and a confirmation vow had to precede membership. Over the years the membership that followed the confirmation vow became, in the

FIRST COMMUNION AND CONFIRMATION

eyes of many, a fuller and a higher membership.

Philip Spener was shocked at conditions in the church, as the confirmation report points out, and counseled that the instruction of the candidate for church membership should be continued until such time as the candidate showed signs of genuine conversion. The candidate had to go through a soul-shattering religious experience to be considered "saved." This was followed by tearful vows and considerable crying by all present.

Perhaps we can be thankful that the idea of the laying on of hands was maintained in the confirmation rite as a device to minimize the emotional and subjective elements that pietism brought with it. In like manner, the prayer that God would grant the confirmand the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit may also have served to retain more of the traditional characteristics of confirmation.

Three practical directives for church life follow from this Biblical and historical study. In the first place, a proper understanding of the Eucharist and of the church as a worshiping eucharistic fellowship decide in advance the question of children's Communion. It is not optional for the church to debate at what age Holy Communion should be granted to children. They are entitled to it by virtue of their baptism. There is no valid theological reason why Communion should be withheld until the level of the fifth grade. The Biblical requirement for worthy participation is not the ability to engage in a metaphysical discussion concerning the real presence or in the ability to confess a long list of sins, but rather to "discern the Lord's body." This means, in the first instance,

to believe that the body and blood of Christ are really present, and this is a faith that probably comes easier to children than to more sophisticated adults. In the second place, it means to manifest an awareness of the oneness of those who come to the altar, a readiness to confess sins that we have committed against a fellow member, and an eagerness to experience our oneness in the body of Christ. Again, it is often the case that children manifest this basic Christian attitude more naturally than do their parents.

The report is to be commended for suggesting that confirmation and first Communion should be separated. This step would clear the way for a more careful and more incisive rethinking of the nature of Communion. It must be remembered that children's Communion is not a subject for discussion which terminates in a congregational resolution. Baptized children are full members of the worshiping eucharistic community and so are entitled to participate. Furthermore, the congregation has placed this decision into the pastor's hands when it called him to be their steward of the mysteries of God.

The Augsburg Confession states that no one has the right to publicly teach, preach, or administer the sacraments in the church without a call (Article XIV). The German paragraph concludes with the phrase *ohne ordentlichen Beruf*, while the Latin reads *nisi rite vocatus*. The call is intended by the confessors to mean the whole complex of the calling action, the calling from within, the "laying on of hands," and the call extended by the congregation. It includes also the rite of ordination. It cannot be reduced to a call which has little divinity attached to it. In ordination the

Holy Spirit is active and conveys His gift through the "laying on of hands at the ordination." Great power is thus communicated to him who is ordained to the holy ministry, for he now acts in Christ's stead, and whatever he does, whether celebrating the eucharist, baptizing, preaching, or forgiving sins, is as valid and certain as if Christ dealt with us Himself.

Thus, if a congregation were to resolve democratically to withhold Communion from children, it would be incumbent on the pastor to explain to his people that such a resolution both violated the Biblical understanding of the eucharistic community and also deprived him of the authority that they had specifically extended to him. In other words, the pastor would have to tell the congregation that he could not be bound by that resolution but would continue or inaugurate the practice of children's Communion. Surely the pastor does not need a congregational resolution to tell him that he is not to despise the little ones or that he is now free "to suffer children to come to him," the representative of Jesus Christ. Rather, both pastor and congregation should repent for having neglected the full liturgy of Word and Sacrament at all the official services and having neglected the obvious nature of the church. The words of Joel may have striking pertinence for the present discussion. He writes:

Return to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments. . . . Sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Sanctify the congregation; assemble the elders; gather the children, even nursing infants. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride

her chamber. Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep and say, "Spare Thy people, O Lord, and make not Thy heritage a reproach, a byword among the nations." (Joel 2:12-17)

Just as the minister is not to ask permission of his congregation as to how he is to preach the Word, so he need not ask his congregation's permission how often he is to celebrate the liturgy of Word and Sacrament. In like manner, it is his responsibility to invite the children to participate in the eucharistic community where the total presence of Christ is manifested in the offering and in the breaking of bread.

The second practical suggestion has already been adumbrated. The Lutheran Church needs to exalt the rite of confirmation and to invest it with the fullest possible sacramental significance. The present writer is not arguing for it to be included in the list of sacraments of the church, but rather pleading that it receive the full recognition that it has had in the tradition of the church. It is the rite of laying on of hands; it is a form of the rite of sealing, which was so important in the early church. The age of confirmation is clearly an adiaphoron. It seems unwise to use confirmation as a device for keeping children with the church. Instead, confirmation should be presented in such a way that the significance of the rite attracts children to remain with the church.

The present writer has practiced children's Communion in his congregation for more than a generation and can attest to the benefits that come from this. It has brought to the children a spiritual enrichment, as would be anticipated by those

who take seriously the promise our Lord attached to it. It has touched significantly the home life, as well as the life of the congregation. Those who have Christian day schools and practice children's Communion have noted that this practice has greatly added to the substance of the entire educational process. This is especially true when the teachers of the school are sacramentally inclined and extend the liturgy into the classroom and the classroom into the liturgy. Surely one of the objects of the Christian day school is to give the child a sense of dignity and a realization that he can function as a member of the body of Christ in the royal priesthood. Children's Communion has indeed given children dignity. It has also been observed that children who have participated in the liturgy for many years prior to confirmation will also have a better understanding and appreciation of confirmation instruction.

It seems that the present practice of combining confirmation and Communion and withholding both rites until children have reached the age of 13, 14, or 15 is a reflection not only of certain historical developments in the church but also of a certain fear about taking the Holy Spirit at His word. The church has always had a guilty conscience about the Holy Spirit and has never been quite sure how the Spirit works within the community of the faithful.

Jean von Allmen reflects this understanding when he writes in his classical essay, "Worship and the Holy Spirit":

We have grown so accustomed to the existence of the Church that when people talk about the Holy Spirit, our first reaction as Christians is to be on guard. The origin

of this instinctive mistrust is easy to trace. It springs from two causes: the first is our conviction (conscious or unconscious) that the existing Church falls short in more than one respect of what it ought to be, what the Holy Spirit wants it to be; although we are very lazy about turning this conviction into a firm intention to reform it. The second source of our mistrust is that the Church is attacked by the world . . . and also by the sects, both of which try to make us believe that the work of the Holy Spirit (if it is still continued at all) is being carried on outside the Church or against it, rather than in it and by it. We do not like facing the problem of the Holy Spirit, because we have a guilty fear that we may have to question many aspects of church life . . .²

This shows up in our own tradition in the striking fact that we find no *epiklesis*, no prayer for the bountiful gift of the Holy Spirit, in the eucharistic liturgy traditionally printed in *The Lutheran Hymnal* (pp. 15 ff.). One wonders whether this was deliberate on the part of the commissions that assumed responsibility for the liturgy of the church or if it simply continued an old rationalistic practice. Today it seems that the church must turn to the Pentecostals to find out who the Holy Spirit is and what He does. Unfortunately, many laymen and some preachers are doing just that. Perhaps we should not be too harsh in our judgment of them, for we have not taught them what the church is, we have not made it possible for them to experience the church as the worshipping spiritual community, we have not helped them to "discern the body of Christ."

² Jean-Jacques von Allmen, "Worship and the Holy Spirit," *Studia Liturgica*, II (June 1963), 124.

FIRST COMMUNION AND CONFIRMATION

Finally, the church needs to rethink the role and position of the pastor in the life of the worshiping congregation. Some pastors did misuse their authority and insist on obedience simply by virtue of the fact that they were ordained. When to this attitude was added a frequent misunderstanding of the nature of the church, one can understand a widespread anticlericalism also in our own Synod. But we do not solve the problem by throwing out the baby with the bath water. If he is to function as steward of the mysteries of God,

the pastor must be granted the full authority that Scripture ascribes to him, neither less nor more.

A recovery of children's Communion and a fuller understanding of confirmation is essential if the church is to fulfill its function in the world. To the measure that we recover our understanding of ourselves as the worshiping eucharistic community, led by the Spirit, we shall be faithful to our Lord's mission assignment.

New York, N. Y.