

# Confirmation as a Sacramental Rite

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*Quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus est; hoc est etenim vere propieque catholicum*

OFFICIALLY, NON-SACRAMENTAL RITES devour more of the minister's time than those which have the confessional imprimatur like baptism and the Lord's Supper. Shortly after I was ordained in 1962, a pastor's wife made this profound theological statement: "If pastors spent as much time evangelizing as they did with weddings, the whole world would have a long time ago been converted"—an exaggeration, but in some cases only exaggerations are the most effective vehicles of the truth. Whereas a baptism, over which there is no doubt about its status as a sacrament, can take fifteen minutes at the most, a wedding with the counseling, the rehearsals, the advice of the relevant mothers—counting step-mothers, there could be as many as four—the ceremony itself, which requires that the minister be there at least thirty minutes before and the obligatory receptions, the time involved can be more than half a typical work week for our parishioners. For the weddings of seminarians, add an hour or two for the ceremony.

Until the proposal now afloat in some Lutheran churches that the church bless the unions of same sex couples,<sup>1</sup> we were more or less agreed who could get married. Even if the Roman Catholic Church called marriage a sacrament, Lutherans together with the general Protestant population saw it as the blessing of a union which belonged to the kingdom of the right hand and so doctrinally there was little about which to quibble. For the church, marriage is a lifelong union, but in the view of the world divorce can end it. Each church tradition has learned to live within this tension. Even if we are unable to establish a firm foundation for confirmation, the Lutheran Church has learned to live with it. Some of our problems in defining or determining the value of church rituals is the word "sacrament," a word and category not known in the Scriptures and for which the Apology allows latitude in definition.<sup>2</sup>

## A RITE WITH PRECEDENCE BUT NO DEFINITION

Behind marriage, confirmation is a close second in devouring a minister's time. With a more complex, diversified, and—for

Lutherans—interrupted tradition, confirmation is less susceptible to a common definition and practice. Confirmation does not lack historical precedent, but it is uncertain which of the many historical precedents should determine our definition and practice of the rite. In Orthodox churches priests administer confirmation and the first Communion immediately following baptism. Eastern Orthodox confirmation is recognized by the Roman Catholic Church, though in this communion it is administered later in life and by a bishop.<sup>3</sup> The infant confirmation of the Orthodox is hardly an option for Lutherans, unless the anointing with oil (chrism) in Luther's baptismal rite of 1523 (which he omitted in the 1526 rite) is recognized as confirmation. Historically the chrism given at baptism was seen by some as the origin of confirmation.<sup>4</sup>

Martin Chemnitz notes that originally baptism was accompanied by the anointing and the laying on of hands, and that for several reasons these three actions were separated. First, those who received an heretical baptism were received into the orthodox communion with the laying on of hands. In the East this was accompanied with an anointing. A second case was an emergency baptism administered by a layman. Its legitimacy was confirmed by the laying on of hands by the priest. A third case arose with the spreading out of the church from the towns where the bishop resided. When a presbyter (priest) or deacon administered baptism, the bishop would come later to test and confirm the faith of the newly baptized by the laying on of hands.<sup>5</sup>

Our current rite of confirmation does not exactly correspond to any of these three usages, but they do provide a framework within which it can be understood. We can go even further and conclude that there are elements within our present rite which have biblical precedence. Even if we should agree on a tentative definition of confirmation, we could hardly insist that such a definition would be exhaustive or the last one. Confirmation is more easily described than defined. We know that the rite is administered with hands and appropriate words, but we may be less certain on what the rite requires and accomplishes.<sup>6</sup>

## CONFIRMATION AS RITE OF PASSAGE: RATIONALISM'S UNRECOGNIZED HERITAGE

When I arrived in January 1964 at Trinity in Rockville, Connecticut, the oldest Lutheran church in that state, I discovered old photographs of the church decked out in flowers for confirmation. In the space at the middle of the altar rail stood a trellis studded with white flowers, the kind of thing which reap-

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peared in the marriage ceremonies of the flower children in the late 1960s, when nuptials were leaving the church to take place outdoors in fields and woods. In my experience at Trinity of Flatbush in Brooklyn, New York, boy confirmands wore white shirts and dark suits, and the girls wore long white evening-style dresses. We all have our own memories of confirmation. Church basements and attics may yield their own treasures of relics from this golden age of confirmation in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

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What this all meant became clear in a visit to a German cultural museum in Berlin, which featured an exhibit on confirmation in its nineteenth-century section. In what then had become a united German Empire, confirmation was the rite of passage from youth to adulthood. A confirmation certificate served also as a diploma testifying to the good moral character of the confirmand, recommending the confirmand to his or her first employers. It seems that this view of the rite came with the German immigrants to the United States, where confirmation was seen as a graduation ceremony from formal education, at which time the confirmand took up manual work of some sort. Confirmation took place on Palm Sunday, which was the traditional end of the school year in Germany. In the nineteenth century universal high school education still lay in the future, college education was rare, a master's was still the highest degree and some schools like Johns Hopkins were just thinking of importing the German doctor's degree. Around the age of fourteen my grandfather, Gustav Zimmermann, went to work delivering flowers for a New York City multi-millionaire, Eugene Higgins, a man for whom he worked for sixty years until Higgins died in 1949. He had been confirmed and this meant in the minds of his parents he was qualified for a job.

Though we may want to distance ourselves from a secular definition of confirmation as a rite of passage, that remains a dominant view. Any of the three understandings identified by Chemnitz might be detected in our present rite, but they are incidental to how our people view it. This blending of the secular and religious in the one rite was a legacy of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment Germany, when Protestantism was being transformed into a *Kulturreligion*. Confirmation, as the Jewish Bar Mitzvah, still serves a cultural purpose in Christian communities in drawing a line between childhood and adolescence as the onset of adulthood. Strangely the Jewish Bar Mitzvah copied many features of the Rationalistic practice of confirmation.<sup>7</sup>

After being confirmed, confirmands are, in the eyes of the church and their parents, no longer considered children. Our experience teaches us that children confirmed in eighth grade can hardly be called children one year later. They have reached that age when they begin to assert their rights as individuals, often with a vengeance. Physical changes can be dramatic. Eighth- and ninth-grade students are at various levels of the evolutionary process between childhood and adulthood. One feature of the Enlightenment definition is lost. Confirmation no longer recommends the confirmands for employment, especially in a society in which the church carries few if any functions for the government.

For many, responsible adulthood does not settle in until age thirty, as evidenced in the sitcom *Seinfeld*. Today childhood ends around thirteen or fourteen and a prolonged period of adolescence ends more likely in the mid- or late twenties. Meaningful, permanent employment, marriage, and parenthood are often first-time experiences of adults in their thirties. Confirmation certificates as recommendations for employment were long ago replaced by high school and now college diplomas, and in some cases master's degrees.

With all these changes the view of confirmation as the boundary between childhood and adulthood persists. This is especially true among larger Lutheran congregations with parochial schools, in which confirmation is almost like a baccalaureate service followed by graduation in a matter of weeks. Still popular in the older Midwest congregations are confirmation class reunions which reinforces it as a rite of passage. High school and college reunions assume the role that confirmation reunions once had. This may indicate that the church is losing its place as a significant factor in the lives of most Christians.

Many religions and cultures, including Jews and Moslems, have rites of passage to instill in those receiving these rites and in the community observing them that one phase of life has come to an end and another one is beginning. With the advent of *Religionsgeschichte*, Enlightenment Rationalists understood that communities are held together by their rituals and accordingly defined the sacraments in this way. They held that the sacraments were only customs intended for the apostolic period and not binding on the church, but still they had value as cultural forces. Even from a confessional and biblical point of view, church rituals, including the sacraments, serve to identify the community of believers to themselves and others and to bind them together.<sup>8</sup> Even though the Rationalists and Schleiermacher did not believe that the sacraments were mandated by God to create and confirm faith, on this point they were right.<sup>9</sup>

For example, a public ceremony of marriage makes it difficult for either party to return to the parental home. Funeral services make it clear to the family of the deceased that she or he is no longer with them. Baptism commemorates the start of life and commits the parents to their duties. In the Lord's Supper the community of the followers of Jesus commemorates its fellowship. So confirmation reinforces the natural belief that adulthood is fast approaching. Religiously, the confirmands acknowledge that they are now responsible members of the church, and are acknowledged to be so. Schleiermacher questioned baptism of infants, but was willing to keep it with the

understanding that confirmation would follow.<sup>10</sup> Since Schleiermacher defined the sacraments sociologically as community rites, he was under no compulsion to provide biblical precedent for it. In spite of its official atheism, the German Democratic Republic retained a confirmation-like ceremony, which was the natural result of the Enlightenment definition of the rite.

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Today more and more people in Europe no longer look to the church for rites of passage, and so fewer people bring their children to church for baptism and confirmation. Any decline in church statistics must be understood in the light of this phenomenon, which affects the Western world. The Church of England continues to experience a meteoric drop in the number of baptisms and confirmations. This had led observers to predict that this church has already come to the edge of extinction. The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod (LCMS) is also in a troublesome situation. It experienced 12,000 fewer baptisms of infants in 2000 than in 1999. In that year 33,865 were baptized,<sup>11</sup> a drop of more than 25 percent. This means that in the year 2014 there will be 25 percent fewer children in our confirmation photographs. In light of past performances we can expect that only half of these children will be confirmed. People marrying later in life and having fewer or no children account for these sad results. So we should not conclude that we are less fervent in our concern to evangelize; however, it cannot be overlooked that fewer people look to the church to carry out what were once considered the perfunctory rites of baptism, confirmation, and Marriage.

#### REFORMATION RESPONSES TO CONFIRMATION

The Apology of the Augsburg Confession leaves the possibility open that other rites besides baptism, the Lord's Supper, and Absolution may be called sacraments. Ordination has a claim as a sacrament, though it should be pointed out that the Brief Statement is hardly as generous.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps we should even go further and follow the lead of Hermann Sasse who is critical of Augustine's sacramental definition "as a universal idea or category."<sup>13</sup> Setting aside the idea that there is one definitive understanding of the sacraments overcomes one obstacle in defining confirmation. But that does not give us a reprieve from finding our way through a tortured history to find one precedent for this rite upon which we could agree.

For Lutherans, the Reformation period should have preference. The medieval Catholic rite of confirmation fell into disuse among some Reformation Lutherans and was reintroduced by

the Pietists, especially in those places where it was no longer practiced.<sup>14</sup> True, the Pietists left their imprint on the rite, but it was practiced intermittently during the Reformation era. Martin Bucer introduced a Rite of confirmation with the imposition of hands and the giving of the Holy Spirit, which were features of the Catholic rite (1538–39). His formula, "Receive the Holy Spirit, protection and guard against all evil, strength and help to all goodness from the gracious hand of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen,"<sup>15</sup> bears a faint but recognizable resemblance to the one currently used in the LCMS, "[Mary, John], God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, give you his Holy Spirit, the Spirit of wisdom and knowledge, of grace and prayer, of power and strength, of sanctification and the fear of God."<sup>16</sup> Both formulas are trinitarian, and incorporate elements of the rite of baptism.

Though Luther did not provide a formula for a confirmation rite, as he did for those rites which he considered the real sacraments such as baptism and the Lord's Supper, he and Melancthon were aware that some Lutherans continued the rite, and even gave their approval to some of them.<sup>17</sup> The Reformers wanted to distance themselves from the medieval practice of confirmation which was administered with little or no instruction as an isolated sacramental rite to supplement what baptism did not give. Whatever the Reformation objections were to the medieval rite, it was now to be administered following catechesis, though an emergency confirmation in some cases would hardly allow this.<sup>18</sup> Roman Catholics give baptism an important place in their theology, but persist in holding that confirmation bestows grace which baptism does not.<sup>19</sup>

Completely removing confirmation from the liturgical life of the Reformation church could have been accomplished in no easier way than with a cease and desist order as with indulgences, private masses, and prayers to the saints, but the rite was so much a part of the German *pysche* that it remained in place in some lands. In other lands where it stopped, it was re-instituted.<sup>20</sup> Luther privately examined children whose parents thought them to be ready for Communion, but such examinations could hardly be considered confirmation rites. There were examinations before the congregation, but at best they were *Ersatz* ceremonies providing evidences that the candidates should be admitted to the Lord's Supper. Such examinations were accompanied with prayers of the congregation. These measures proved to be temporary and a full confirmation rite was again in wide use in Germany by the end of the sixteenth century.

Though *Ersatz* ceremonies made a contribution in inserting an examination of the knowledge and determining the sincerity of the candidates for Holy Communion — items which were lacking from the Catholic rite, but without the imposition of hands — it did not prove to be an adequate substitute for the older rite.<sup>21</sup> Luther and Brenz objected to the laying on of hands as a necessary part of the rite,<sup>22</sup> but it was this part of the rite which was noticeably missing and which for the people made confirmation a rite. Words without symbols or symbolic gestures can only with great difficulty be understood as rites. Fraternal orders like the Masons, which preserved the Rationalistic heritage, understood this. It is also endemic to the Lutheran cultus that visible signs are part of the rituals.<sup>23</sup> Sweden offers

a story out of step with the German experience. Confirmation had been abolished there in 1593 and under the influence of Rationalism was reintroduced in 1811.<sup>24</sup>

### A REFORMATION EXPERIMENT IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Three centuries later, a similar hand-less rite was under consideration by the Inter-Lutheran Commission on confirmation/First Communion Subcommittee (1974–75) for the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, in which the LCMS participated. Since children were now allowed (invited) to Communion before being confirmed, the subcommittee discussed whether an initiation rite of some sort should accompany the first Communion. This suggestion was rejected for several reasons, among which was that another confirmation-like rite separating baptism from Communion would be put in place. This would be seen as reinstating what they wanted removed. Defining confirmation was sufficiently problematic without having to provide another theological rationale for a confirmation-like ceremony.

The commission held that baptism and no other rite was required for reception of the Sacrament. Without any firm evidence, one might assume that in some of the churches the ministers precede the first Communion with some type of announcement and prayers for the new communicants. While admission to the first Communion in Lutheran churches was to be seen as a one-on-one experience between the pastor and the child, it could be that entire groups of children are admitted to the first Communion in the Roman Catholic style. As administering first Communion before confirmation becomes more commonplace, it is not unlikely that it will be by an examination or a rite or both, no matter how short they might be.

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While the influence of Roman Catholic practice on Lutherans cannot be denied or ignored, the first Communion has been and should be seen as something special. With many of us, first Communion was seen as a special occasion that took place on the Sunday after we were confirmed, at which special clothing worn for confirmation was worn again. A confirmation administered on Palm Sunday was followed by an Easter Communion. Whatever ritual which might eventually be adopted to recognize the first Communion when it precedes confirmation, it would probably or even inevitably resemble the Reformation-era *Ersatz* rites. Should this happen—and might have already happened—we would end up having two “confirmation” rites, one without hands and the other with hands.<sup>25</sup> This would only compound any difficulties we would have in agreeing on a definition and practice of confirmation.

In some churches it has long been common to administer confirmation and the first Communion on the same Sunday, often Pentecost or another Sunday close to the end of the school year in the United States. This arrangement superficially resembles the custom of the Eastern Orthodox, who administer both the Eucharist and confirmation with baptism to infants. Like the Roman Catholics Lutherans separate the administration of baptism and confirmation; Lutherans however have traditionally placed the first Communion after confirmation. Only at the Council of Florence in 1439 was confirmation recognized as a sacrament. So it is not surprising that since the Roman Church holds that it is necessary for salvation, it accordingly allows for its administration without prior instruction.<sup>26</sup> Rome also recognizes the Orthodox rite which is administered immediately following baptism, and by a priest and not a bishop; however, within her own communion Rome insists that confirmation be performed by a bishop. (Since Rome does not insist that a bishop administer confirmation, it should be asked why she insists that only a bishop administer Ordination.)

Like the rituals of baptism and the Mass taken over from the medieval Catholic church, confirmation underwent an Evangelical reconstruction among Lutherans, and by 1552 it was introduced into church orders of ten cities and provinces.<sup>27</sup> Even if its practice was without firm historical and theological reasons from a Reformation perspective, its popularity with the people provided a sufficient reason for its reinstatement. During the Adiaphoristic Controversy, an abridged rite without the imposition of hands and concentrating on the words was practiced in the Lutheran congregations that dissented from the Leipzig and Augsburg Interims. When the imperial forces no longer occupied these lands, a more fully developed form was reinstated<sup>28</sup> and had support of the leading theologian of the Formula of Concord Martin Chemnitz:

Our theologians have often shown that if traditions that are useless, superstitious, and in conflict with Scripture are removed, the rite of confirmation can be used in godly fashion and for the edification of the church, namely in this way, that those who were baptized in infancy (for that is now the condition of the church) would, when they have arrived at the years of discretion, be diligently instructed in the sure and simple teaching of the church’s doctrine and, when it is evident that the elements of the doctrine have been sufficiently grasped, be brought afterward to the bishop and the church. There the child who was baptized in infancy would by a brief and simply admonition be reminded of his baptism, namely, that he was baptized, how, why, and into what he was baptized, what in this baptism the whole Trinity conferred upon and sealed to him, namely the covenant of peace and the compact of grace, how there Satan was renounced and a profession of faith and a promise of obedience made.<sup>29</sup>

Perhaps no contemporary definition of confirmation can improve on this, though such phrases as “compact of grace” and “promise of obedience” seem strikingly out of place in a Lutheran context.



Chemnitz allows that following the example of the apostles, a laying on of hands could accompany this rite, but according to most commonly held Lutheran definitions, confirmation is ranked with the adiaphora.<sup>30</sup> We have no rite for an emergency confirmation and often Christians baptized as adults are not confirmed. Though no Lutheran minister is concerned that there is no salvation in the absence of confirmation, it would be difficult to find a Lutheran church today which has taken the option of omitting it.<sup>31</sup>

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confirmation in the Roman Catholic Church takes on the characteristics of baptism in giving graces not given in this Sacrament. Although Chemnitz vehemently objects to this, some common Lutheran understandings of the rite may have followed the course Chemnitz warns against. Rather than being an incidental or occasional rite, confirmation is administered after long, serious catechetical preparation and detailed examination and a great deal of ceremony. In this way we may have preserved what was best in both the Catholic and Lutheran understandings. While we do not attach a sacramental value to confirmation as we do to baptism, a rite consisting of a word promising or giving the Holy Spirit (is there a real difference?) and the laying on of hands certainly has a sacramental character about it.

A proposed rite avoids a specific bestowing of the Holy Spirit and comes no closer to a sacramental understanding than these words: “The almighty God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has regenerated you through water and the Holy Spirit and has forgiven you all your sins, strengthen you with his grace to life everlasting.” Since God strengthens only with the Holy Spirit, this may be a distinction without a difference. Though confirmation is not necessary for salvation, parents not requiring their children to be instructed or confirmed, or children refusing to be confirmed, present an issue of pastoral concern in repudiating an opportunity to be instructed in that word which is the very substance of baptism. The pastor will have to decide whether such persons exclude themselves from the church’s fellowship.

#### CONFIRMATION RITES TODAY — POPULARLY PRACTICED

Like other church rites, confirmations have a purpose in bringing into the church services relatives and friends, who ironically themselves may have failed to carry out what was expected of them as confirmands. The formal evening wear once in vogue in many churches has been replaced in many churches by white robes which may have some biblical significance drawn from

Revelation 7:9. Throw-away gowns may be in use and may prove to be less expensive and absolutely less troublesome than rentals that must be retrieved from the confirmands, often by the pastor or his wife, packed and returned to some place in Illinois. As with graduations and weddings, professional photography rounds out the ceremony. Confirmands are photographed with their comrades and individually with the pastor and parents. It is almost as if we are capturing the last and often one isolated moment of “regeneration” in the lives of some confirmands. So our theorem approaches the level of absolute dogma that non-sacramental rituals devour more of the church’s energies than do the so-called genuine sacraments.

#### PIECING TOGETHER A DEFINITION

In discussing the development of confirmation in the Reformation era, Bjarne Hareide identifies several Reformation understandings of this rite which we will recognize as common among us.<sup>32</sup> Frank Senn identifies other understandings which some Lutherans added after the Reformation. First, the sacramental view sees the essential part of the rite in the laying on of the hands, generally by the bishop, to convey the Holy Spirit. According to the Roman Catholic understanding, confirmation is a self-contained sacrament giving what baptism cannot give. Stated positively, confirmation bestows its own virtues and graces complementing but not completing baptism.

Against this view, which characterized the medieval and then Tridentine definition of the rite, the Lutherans raised their objections; however, a giving of the Holy Spirit was included in some Reformation rites and is included in *Lutheran Worship*.<sup>33</sup> A second view places the emphasis on the instruction required in order to undergo the rite itself. This was the Reformation’s contribution to the practice of confirmation and was seen as necessary by Luther, if it were to be continued.<sup>34</sup> (Contemporary Roman Catholicism requires instruction for confirmation.) Some Reformation-era churches used an *Ersatz* rite, but without the imposition of hands it was hardly identical with the Roman Catholic confirmation rites. Lutheran forms of confirmation or the *Ersatz* rite declared that the child was ready to receive the Holy Communion.

Though examination of the confirmands was a Reformation adjustment to the Roman Catholic rite, it was hardly original with the Reformers. Already in the New Testament, instruction or catechesis was given the catechumens who were then examined about their faith. Answers to these questions evolved into our Apostles’ Creed. Thus the Reformers’ introduction of instruction before receiving Holy Communion was only re-instituting an early church practice used in connection with baptism in the earliest centuries. Nearly all New Testament documents were originally written as catecheses.

Another contribution of the Reformation era to our understanding of confirmation rite was a statement of commitment by the confirmand to the Christian religion, which might be accompanied by promises of the parents and the godparents. During the Middle Ages parents and godparents made these promises at the baptism of their children.<sup>35</sup> One, and perhaps the chief, reason for retaining (or reinstating) the rite in the Reformation were the Anabaptist objections to the Lutheran

practice of baptizing infants, which they wrongly saw as being administered without faith.<sup>36</sup> Baptism of infants gave the Anabaptists cause to accuse the Lutherans of spiritual laxity, a charge still leveled against Lutherans by the Reformed. A rite of confirmation in which baptismal vows were remembered or even repeated served to answer these objections. These played a role in Martin Bucer's rite of confirmation.<sup>37</sup> Confirmation hardly gave the Anabaptists reason to desist from their accusations that the Lutherans baptized infants without faith. Later the Pietists changed Bucer's understanding of confirmation as a remembrance of baptismal vows to a ritual of renewal.<sup>38</sup> The current LCMS rite of confirmation, "Do you this day in the presence of God and of this congregation acknowledge the gifts which God gave you in your baptism?" preserves Bucer's thinking of a repetition of the rite of baptism, something resembling the now common practice of renewing or repeating of marriage vows. This may provide the best possible definition for our practice of confirmation, or at least this understanding would have to be included.

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*Reformation Lutherans put the greater weight on a confession of faith. Pietists used Confirmation to test the sincerity of personal faith.*

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Our situation in the United States today is different from the Reformation-era Germany, but not without parallels. With the influence of revivals in the United States, especially as they have been popularized in the media by Billy Graham, confirmation still answers those concerns that Christians baptized as infants are less involved in their churches than those baptized as adults. It is doubtful whether baptistic church bodies are any more impressed with our rite of confirmation than were the Reformation-era Anabaptists, but it does serve the purpose of saying that faith is required for salvation. This can lead to the misunderstanding that Lutherans hold to the Reformed view that baptism of infants is administered without faith and hence a ritual like confirmation compensates for this deficit, a view held by Scheiermacher, who has remained influential in Protestant theology.

At the heart of our differences with the Reformed in general and the Baptists in particular are entirely different understandings of baptism, faith, and anthropology. For Baptists baptism serves as a confession of faith or pledge and for Lutherans it is a self-contained rite presupposing, confirming, or creating faith but not dependent on faith for its value. Like any other church rite, baptism is a confession in the sense that it says something about what we believe. This is also true of confirmation whether or not we articulate it in just this way. In this rite the confir-

mands say something about their faith. It should be noted that the Apostles' Creed, the premier confession, arose as the response to questions asked of the baptized before that sacrament was administered.

Lutherans agree with Roman Catholics that baptism grants grace, but do not see confirmation or any other rite as necessary or supplementing what may be lacking in baptism. For Schleiermacher baptism without confirmation is incomplete. For Roman Catholics baptism is complete, but confirmation provides things baptism does not. In defining confirmation, we cannot release ourselves from the two alternatives of seeing it as something God does towards us (the Roman Catholic view) or something we do towards God (general Protestant view).

#### CAN WE HAVE A POSITION ON CONFIRMATION?

In unsettled times, historicism, gently disguised as Romanticism, offers a secure haven. It is a kind of nostalgia for what are considered the better days of years gone past. Historicism fails to provide solutions when it draws from any number of eras. Its discoveries can be contradictory and unsettling. For example, the practice of some churches requiring personal confessions of faith instead of questioning the confirmands about the catechism was initiated by the Pietists. Typically Pietism held that the sincerity of faith (*fides qua*) was more important than its content (*fides quae*). Later the Rationalists took this one step further and had the confirmands prepare written confessions which they read to the congregation. They wanted to make sure that confirmands understood what they believed.

This happened in the case of two of my children. One had to get to the church one hour earlier than the examination to write an essay on excommunication, and the other had the privilege of writing the essay at home. A good essay on the topic of regular church attendance was given by one confirmand in the younger son's class. Only after hearing the prepared paper did I learn that neither he nor his parents were faithful church goers. Also part of the ceremony for many of us, and part of the proposed liturgy for confirmation, is recitation of a Bible verse. This has the effect of being a special word of God for the rest of our lives. At life's end this verse at the request of the deceased or the survivors has served as the text for the funeral sermon. Surprise of surprises, this was an innovation of the Rationalists and not a specifically Lutheran practice. Also part of the Rationalistic heritage was a pastoral exhortation for the confirmands to keep their vows which were made to God and not man.<sup>39</sup> How many pious parents have exhorted their wayward children by reminding them of their confirmation vows, a most Reformed understanding of the sacraments in general! Elaborate dress and church decoration also is the heritage of Rationalism and not the Reformation. Thus in using history and tradition to put together a doctrinal or working definition, we may learn that things to which we dearly hold have no real place in Lutheran theology. Things we assumed to be Lutheran are not.

#### THE ROCKY ROAD TO DEFINITION

Historical romanticism is fraught with difficulties, but still what Lutherans did in the formative years of the Reformation helps us understand what we do now. Hareide's *Die Confirmation in*

*der Reformationszeit* provides an excellent overview of the important years from 1520 to 1585. Lutherans then as now were not all of one mind in the practice and ritual of confirmation. It was a matter of discussion with their Roman Catholic opponents from Augsburg in 1530 to Regensburg in 1541. Ironically, in covering diverse definitions and practices of confirmation, we are strangely the Reformation's true children. With the convening of the Council of Trent (1545), the Roman Catholic party solidified and codified medieval doctrinal definitions. What had been said about confirmation at the Council of Florence (1439) was affirmed at Trent.

Even if Lutherans had not come to a common understanding of confirmation during the Reformation, Trent did determine what would be unacceptable. The Augsburg Interim (1548) required Lutherans to accept certain elements of the Roman Catholic definition,<sup>40</sup> but the Leipzig Interim<sup>41</sup> in the same year was more moderate. Lutherans could not object to confirmation *per se*, but whatever was forced upon them, especially in times of persecution, was unacceptable.<sup>42</sup> As the Reformation era came to an end, confirmation with some of the Catholic elements contained in the interims were gradually more widely accepted by the Lutherans, but it was still not a universal practice. It was not an either/or matter,<sup>43</sup> which is the character of adiaphora. Ceremonies attached to the necessary rites of the sacraments do not all have to be the same. Even more so, freedom is allowed in ceremonies attached to a rite like confirmation.

#### SIFTING THROUGH THE PARTS TO CONSTRUCT THE WHOLE

Hareide finds that the Lutheran Reformation confirmation rites had four parts in common: (1) public examination, (2) a confession based on the catechism, (3) prayer, and (4) a blessing. Other rites included: (5) an explanation of confirmation, (6) an admonition, (7) questions attached to a vow, (8) answers to the vow, and (9) the imposition of the hands. The most common form had five parts: (1) an examination, (2) confession, (3) prayer, (4) imposition of hands, and (5) the blessing.<sup>44</sup> My own confirmation seems to have fit the longer form with nine parts, with the examination being administered before the congregation on the Sunday prior to the rite itself, a practice instituted by the Rationalists.

Roman Catholics emphasized confirmation as a rite conferring sacramental grace. Reformation Lutherans put the greater weight on a confession of faith. Pietists used confirmation to test the sincerity of personal faith and the Rationalists wanted to make sure that confirmands used as many of their intellectual talents (reason) as possible. Most of us have engaged in confirmation rites which have had these elements. *Lutheran Worship's* rite seems to be a construct of Catholic, Reformation, and perhaps Pietistic elements: hands are laid on with a giving of the Holy Spirit, confirmands are asked about their faith, and a vow is extracted from them. No provision is made for a personal statement of faith, a prepared written discourse, or the relatively intensive examination in which we were required to know the number and names of the natures in Christ and differences between original and actual sin. This approach might have led some ministers to commend confirmands able to provide the

most correct answers; intellectual capacity is mistaken for faith. One hesitates to say that this is the heritage of Rationalism.

#### PRETENDING TO HAVE A POSITION AND A PRACTICE

Seminary students are prepared to give instruction for confirmation by courses in the Lutheran Confessions and parish education. They are required to recite Luther's Small Catechism, but to the best of my knowledge they are not given any dogmatical basis for the rite itself. Any knowledge of the actual practice and administration of the rite has to come from the vicarage supervisor. One can only conclude that a supervising pastor fills in the gaps for future pastors as they actually carry out the instruction leading to confirmation and perform the rite. Some of us know what to do because we were confirmed, so it can be assumed that we all know what confirmation is, what we are to do, what is happening, and what the benefits are. With a greater portion of seminary students coming from non-Lutheran homes, knowledge from this kind of firsthand experience can no longer be presupposed. Neither the Confessions nor the synodically adopted documents like the Brief Statement define confirmation. Thus confirmation is a work in process, just as it was in the Reformation, which results in inconsistencies.

#### LIVING WITH INCONSISTENCIES

It seems that we require less of adults joining the church than we do of our children. One Lutheran church confirms adults after three hours with the pastor over coffee and donuts. Episcopal churches have a session or two before the bishop shows up on the designated Sunday morning. Ministers face the dilemma of younger confirmands who absent themselves from most of the instruction and whose parents still insist that they be confirmed. Adults are often not totally faithful in receiving instruction. In one case, a man sent his wife, who was already a member, in his stead — *vicarious confirmation*. Then there is the problem of the pastor who determines that members confirmed in one Lutheran congregation and received by transfer do not even have a minimal knowledge of the Christian faith. (Do they know the Apostles' Creed and the sacraments?) The once intensive period of catechism instruction for both children and adults, which most of us received, has under societal pressures gradually fallen away in many churches. Churches with parochial schools can enforce stricter standards. Pastors without parochial schools have to depend on the good will of parents and the children to receive instruction.

#### INCONSISTENCIES THAT ONLY OUR PEOPLE SEE

Then there are the anomalies which only our parishioners see. A person baptized as a child is later confirmed, but a baptized adult is not confirmed. Strangely an unbaptized child taking instruction for confirmation will often be baptized and then confirmed in the same service, but an adult entering the church might only be baptized. This says more about what we think of baptism than what we think of confirmation, but it does that too. We have in fact divided baptism into baptism of infants and baptism of adults, as if the age of the recipients determines

the character of this sacrament. Think of this situation. A child of eleven is baptized and can only receive Communion after he is confirmed perhaps two or three years later, but an adolescent fifteen or older can receive Communion right after he is baptized. These are questions for which I do not have immediate answers, but which show that we have difficulties in defining both confirmation and baptism.

A precise or a commonly agreed upon definition of confirmation may not be possible, and those who favor eliminating the rite have historical precedents for support. But there are also compelling reasons for not taking this step. Eliminating the rite will loosen one of the bonds which have held congregations and churches together. Confirmation is one way in which we relate to one another as Lutherans. Remove confirmation and what distinguishes Lutherans from other Protestants would be lost. More importantly the Reformation contribution which balanced the weight between confirmation as a mere ritual and as a ceremony concluding a period of instruction would be lost.

Humanly speaking, confirmation instruction becomes the pastor's last opportunity to inculcate with Christian teachings those who will soon put their childhood behind them. No matter how confirmation is defined, it has for thousands, perhaps millions, of Lutherans been the defining moment in their Christian life to which they have looked back with happiness. Often the pastor who confirmed them remains in their minds their pastor for the rest of their lives. The ritual and the other events of that day are firmly impressed in their memories, and, for good reason, the Bible passage spoken over them during confirmation has a special force and is often requested for their funeral sermons.

#### **DELIVERING THE INSTRUCTION (CATECHESIS)**

Without even getting into a theological understanding of confirmation, we should be generally agreed that up to now it has played an important part in the lives of our people. I say "up to now," simply because as the influence of the church wanes in our society, so also the desire for confirmation among our people for their children. One of the more courageous stands was taken by His Late Eminence, Archbishop Cardinal O'Connor of New York, in raising a mighty protest against Sunday morning soccer. He took it in the neck from the media, but he uncovered a weakness even among Christian parents who put a greater value in having their children kick around a black-and-white ball on Sunday mornings than they do on Jesus Christ and the things of salvation.

Of course, delivering the Christian faith is not only a Sunday morning problem, but a Saturday one too. Elementary school preempts the other five mornings of the week, and so, like a beggar, the church grovels through the afternoon and evening looking for an hour to accomplish her mission. During the absence of Johannes Bugenhagen from Saint Mary's in Wittenberg, Luther preached catechetical sermons from which the Large Catechism came. With the decline of the church's grip on people's lives and the growing difficulty of delivering catechetical education, Sunday morning catechesis may be one solution, even if it is only temporary. Wittenberg in the 1520s may

have been no better than New York today. At one point Luther was so disgusted with the lack of response to his Reformation that he refused to preach.

#### **BEING TOO HARD ON OURSELVES**

Under external pressure from churches that doubt the efficacy of the baptism of infants and internal pressure of our own tradition to continue the practice of confirmation, some churches may have attempted to beef up the rite. To keep the confirmands faithful for one additional year after their confirmation, a church might give the confirmands their certificates the following year. The Pietistic custom of having the confirmands give a personal confession of faith and the Rationalistic addition of requiring prepared statements of faith are also not unknown among us.

It is doubtful that the attempts to adjust the rite itself have produced any measurable results. This desire to nail down the moment of confirmation so that this moment becomes a permanent lifetime commitment may come from the supposedly successful rallies of evangelists, especially Billy Graham, who continues to attract large audiences in person and through the media. His rate of success and failure among those who have made personal decisions for Christ may be no better than our statistics with baptism and confirmation. Then there is the question of determining how many of these decisions are authentic. Some of those making decisions on any given night, perhaps the majority of them, do so only to encourage others. Our statistics may give the impression that as a church we are not doing our job—at least as well as we should.

#### **LIVING WITH FAILURE**

Failure is the downside of preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments. It is a fact of church life from which we would like to run. It is hard to accept and can be understood only within biblical dimensions. Jesus' Parable of the Sower is the story of how the gospel ultimately succeeds in some lives, but fails in most. The productive seed that falls on the good soil is the last attempt which follows the failures of the seed which falls on the road, on the rocky ground, and among the weeds. No sermon can ever be preached, no instruction given, no church rite, including baptism and confirmation, can ever be administered with the understanding that the gospel will accomplish a saving purpose in every person who hears or receives it. When growing statistics become the doctrine by which the church stands or falls, we take upon ourselves an unnecessary burden. Every minister faces the personal sorrow of confronting baptized and confirmed people who for one reason or another fall away.

Then there is the unrelated statistic of those who once made a commitment for the ministry and did not fulfill it or have even fallen from the faith. My experience goes back to entering prep school in Bronxville in 1949. Even an intense religious and theological education does not guarantee perseverance in the faith. Ministers now know of grandparents who want their grandchildren baptized and confirmed, but the parents see no value in any of the church's rituals even as rites of passage. Even eighteenth-century German Rationalism had a religious tone



to it and so the people looked to the church for baptism, confirmation, and marriage.

Within our context this desire to have the church involved at any juncture of life is gradually being eroded away. Even when parishioners and non-parishioners request the church's rites for themselves or their family members, they may be less than fully informed or even have erroneous understandings of the rites. In spite of extensive counseling by the minister, there is no assurance that the applicants accept the church's view of the rite or for that matter, even understand it. Still the benefits of any rite do not depend on the recipients' understanding of it.

### CONFIRMATION AS COMPOSITE RITE

Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher defined theology by what he observed the church doing.<sup>45</sup> In the case of confirmation we may be left without any other choice in coming to a definition. As confirmation is practiced today, it is a picture or moment of the Christian life in miniature. It requires instruction in the Christian faith, acknowledgment of sin, confession in Christ as Lord, a sincere desire to live without sin and to commit one's

life to God. It gives the Holy Spirit with the laying on of hands and recognizes the confirmand as worthy to receive the Holy Communion. This definition could easily fit baptism. With the exception of the laying on of hands, these things happen every time the church assembles on Sunday mornings.

Giving the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands may be problematic, but it is not *necessarily* problematic. Roman Catholic dependence on the apostolic laying on of hands on the Samaritans previously baptized by Philip can only with great difficulty be seen as referring to the rite of confirmation as we know it; however, in the New Testament the laying on of hands was used for any number of occasions. In all of these cases the Holy Spirit was given in one way or another, but with the understanding that the Spirit was equipping the recipient for a particular work or thing. To say that the baptized already have the Spirit and do not need him is true enough, but the Spirit can be given to carry out a particular work in the church or to help a person face a certain period of his life, which for the confirmands are filled with more uncertainties than any other period. **LOGIA**

### NOTES

1. See Herbert Chilstrom, *Sexual Fulfillment: For Single and Married, Straight and Gay, Young and Old* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2001). Chilstrom is the immediate past presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. For an appraisal, see Richard John Neuhaus, "The Public Square," *First Things* no. 118 (December 2001): 92.

2. Ap XIII, 2: "But we do not think that it makes much difference if, for the purpose of teaching, different people have different enumerations, as long as they properly preserve the matters handed down in Scripture." All quotations of the Lutheran Confessions are taken from *Kolb-Wengert. Sacramentum* is used in Ephesians to translate the Greek word *mysterion*: "*Sacramentum hoc magnum est ego autem dico in Christo et in ecclesia*" (5:32). It seems that Paul realizes that the word mystery or sacrament might be understood by his readers to refer to marriage. He clarifies this by using the word of Christ's relationship to the church; however, here might be the roots of its being used of a rite or institution.

3. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1994), para. 1312. Compare this with The Seventh Session of the Council of Trent, March 3, 1547, Canon III: "If anyone says that the ordinary minister of holy confirmation is not solely the bishop, but any simple priest, let him be *anathema*"; quoted in Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, trans. Fred Kramer (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), 2: 181.

4. Martin Luther, *The Order of Baptism* (1523): "And I anoint thee with the oil of salvation in Jesus Christ our Lord" (AE 53: 95-103).

5. Chemnitz, *Examination*, 2:208-10.

6. Arthur C. Repp's *Confirmation in the Lutheran Church* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964) remains the best overview of the history of confirmation among Lutherans. A specialist in education, Repp saw the rite as part of the child's incorporation into the congregation.

7. For a discussion of confirmation in the age of Rationalism, see Frank C. Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 559-62, under the section entitled "The Rite of Confirmation and Culture Christianity": Following the custom of the Pietists, the confirmands were required to write a confession of their personal faith. Vows, and admonitions by the pastors to keep their vows, were at the center of the ceremony. Our custom of giving each child a Bible passage comes from this period. In some cases a moralistic saying was substituted and in other cases the children went to their

parents to ask for forgiveness and their blessing. "Confirmation was one's admission to Holy Communion, and also the requirement for getting married in the church or serving as a baptismal sponsor. In not a few places in the early nineteenth century, it was also an admission into civil right and privileges such as going to high school, joining a guild, getting a job, or (for upper-class girls) making one's debut in society (for which purpose confirmation was sometimes delayed)" (561).

8. Consider the first part of Ap XV (Latin), "sacraments were instituted not only to be marks of profession among human beings . . ."

9. For a discussion of baptism and confirmation in the theologies of the Rationalists and Schleiermacher, see David P. Scaer, "The Doctrine of baptism of infants in the German Protestant Theology of the Nineteenth Century" (Th.D. diss., Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis, Missouri, 1963), 22-72.

10. Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (New York: Harper and Row, 1956), 2:637: "Hence our paragraph, by making confirmation a part of the administration of baptism, lays it as a duty on the Church to give confirmation very close attention, in order that, so far as the Church can secure it, the later rite may approve itself the true and worthy consummation of infant baptism."

11. "Congregations' gifts rise as member numbers fall," *The Lutheran Witness* 120, no. 12 (December 2001): 14.

12. Ap XIII, 11: "But if ordination is understood with reference to the ministry of the Word, we have no objection to calling ordination a sacrament."

13. Hermann Sasse, "Word and Sacrament: Preaching and the Lord's Supper," *Letters to Lutheran Pastors*, No. 42, July 1956, in *We Confess the Sacraments*, trans. Norman Nagel (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House), 14: "Christ did not institute some abstract *sacramentum*. He instituted the office of the ministry, baptism, Holy Communion, and the office of the keys." See also 15-16. Reprinted in Hermann Sasse, *We Confess Anthology* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999).

14. Repp, *Confirmation*, 68.

15. Senn, *Christian Liturgy*, 350. Repp (*Confirmation*, 38) provides another translation: "Receive ye the Holy Spirit, Refuge and Protector against all harm, Strength and Help for all good from the hand of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit."

16. *Lutheran Worship* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1982), 206-7.

17. See Bjarne Hareide, *Die Konfirmation in der Reformationszeit*:

*Eine Untersuchung der lutherische Konfirmation in Deutschland 1520–1585* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966).

18. For a contemporary Roman Catholic understanding of confirmation, see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para. 1309.

19. *Ibid.*, para. 1315–21. Apostolic precedence is found in Acts 8:14–17 with the laying on of the hands on those baptized by Philip. “Confirmation perfects baptismal grace.” It grants an indelible character and is administered in the West after the child has reached the age of reason; however, the Eastern practice of administering baptism, confirmation, and Communion during infancy is acceptable.

20. Hareide, *Konfirmation*, 151.

21. *Ibid.* See also Senn, *Christian Liturgy*, 350–51.

22. Hareide, *Konfirmation*, 165; Senn, *Christian Liturgy*, 350. Without instruction, the papal confirmation was for Luther “*Affenspiel*”—monkey business.

23. The Apology XIII opens the door for multiple sacraments and concedes that confirmation and extreme unction are inherited from the Fathers, which even the Roman church does not require for salvation. Kolb-Wengert, 220–21.

24. Senn, *Christian Liturgy*, 559, 561.

25. See Jeffrey A. Truscott, “Ritualizing First Communion: A Return to the ‘Fleshspots of Egypt,’” *Lutheran Forum* 35, no. 3 (Fall 2001): 24–26. While the title of this article is in itself revealing in warning against another separation of baptism from Holy Communion, for those who desire more information note should be made of his Ph.D. dissertation from Notre Dame, “Ecclesiological Baptism and Baptismal Ecclesiology: Baptism, Affirmation of Baptism, and First Communion in Lutheran Book of Worship.” This article provides a valuable bibliography on the matter.

26. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 331, para. 1307: “But in danger of death children should be confirmed even if they have not yet attained the age of discretion.”

27. For a listing of the names, see Senn, *Christian Liturgy*, 350. Repp (*Confirmation*, 17) notes that confirmation was part of Bugenhagen’s Church Order for Brandenburg (1540) and the Wittenberg Reformation (1545).

28. Hareide, *Konfirmation*, 64–73.

29. Chemnitz, *Examination*, 2:212. Lutheran objections to the Roman Catholic rite of confirmation can be found in 2:181–216. See also Senn, *Christian Liturgy*, 351.

30. Ap XIII, 6: “Confirmation and extreme unction are rites inherited from the Fathers, which even the church does not require as necessary to salvation, since they lack the command of God.” At the time of the Reformation, Roman Catholics followed Thomas Aquinas in holding that, “Confirmation is necessary for salvation, although one can be saved without it as long as it is not held in contempt.” The only other reference to confirmation is in the Treatise (73), where it is listed

as one of the functions assigned to bishops and not priests. Since it is listed with the blessing of bells, no wonder Melancthon sees little value in the rite.

31. It was not practiced in eighteenth century Sweden.

32. Hareide, *Konfirmation*. For an overview see the table of contents (7–8).

33. *Lutheran Worship*, 205–8.

34. Hareide (*Konfirmation*, 58–59) notes that in the late Middle Ages very little instruction, if any, was given before administering confirmation.

35. *Ibid.*, 56–57.

36. For a lively presentation of the presence of faith in infants at the time of their baptism, see Karl Brinkel, *Die Lehre Luthers von der fides infantium bei der Kindertaufe* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1958). Also see the chapter on infant faith in David P. Scaer, *Baptism, Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics* 9 (Saint Louis: Luther Academy, 1999), 147–56.

37. Senn, *Christian Liturgy*, 350.

38. *Ibid.*, 360.

39. *Ibid.*, 361.

40. The Augsburg Interim, which required Lutheran submission, set forth a classical Catholic definition of confirmation as a sacrament which provided nourishment to the baptized. New Testament support was anchored in Acts 8:17, in which the apostles gave the Spirit to the baptized Samaritans by the laying on of hands; Luke 24:49, in which Jesus promises the Holy Spirit; and John 14:26, in which Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit will teach all things. From Acts 8:17 the rite originally consisted only of the laying on of hands to which anointing with oil was added to signify the giving of the Spirit. Also required was instruction about confirmation, confession of Christ, and obedience to the church. It was administered by the bishop at the age of understanding, but could with good conscience be given earlier. See Robert Kolb and James A. Nestingen, eds., *Sources and Contexts of the Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 160–61.

41. The Leipzig Interim was less burdensome and required examination by the bishop or his designee and reaffirmed promises made in baptism. The confirmed were strengthened by the means of grace through the laying on of the hands and prayers (Kolb and Nestingen, eds., *Sources and Contexts*, 392).

42. See FC SD x, 26–28, “Concerning Ecclesiastical Practices That Are Called Adiaphora.” Lutherans rejected human commands imposed upon the church by force.

43. Hareide, *Konfirmation*, 300.

44. *Ibid.*, 295–96.

45. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 1:88. Consider for example his paragraph 19: “Dogmatic Theology is the science which systematizes the doctrine prevalent in a Christian Church at a given time.”