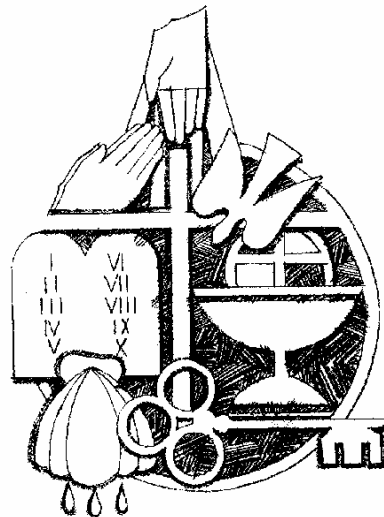


Confirmation, Catechesis, and First Communion in the Lutheran Church

*A Study Document prepared by the
Commission on Theological and Social Concerns*



First submitted to the Forty-Eighth Synod of
the Evangelical Lutheran Church of England
12 October 2002

Received by the Forty-Ninth Synod of
the Evangelical Lutheran Church of England
27 September 2003



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The Pre-Reformation Origins of Confirmation

The early church recognised quite rightly that Holy Baptism was a washing of water and the Holy Spirit, by which the candidate was cleansed of his sins and reborn to new life in Christ. For the Scriptures teach clearly that the Holy Spirit is given with the water (Jn 3:5; Acts 2:38-39; I Cor. 6:11; 12:13; Tit. 3:5-6). The Holy Spirit came visibly upon Christ at His Baptism to reveal to us what happens invisibly at every Christian Baptism (Mt. 3:16 and parallels). However, as the coming of the Spirit is unseen, the church very soon added certain actions to the baptismal rite to confess His coming. Before or after the washing with water in the Triune Name, the coming of the Holy Spirit to the candidate was marked by the outward actions of anointing with oil ('christening'), laying on of hands, the sign of the cross, and prayer. (Later in the West, this secondary ritual act came to be called *confirmatio*—a Latin word meaning 'strengthening', i.e., with the Holy Spirit; or 'confirming' that He had come.) Immediately following Baptism, the candidate was brought into the Divine Service to receive Holy Communion for the first time.

In Eastern Orthodoxy this procedure remains mostly unchanged today. Both infant children and adult converts are baptised, anointed with the laying on of hands ('chrismation'), and communed on the same occasion, in unbroken succession. In Western Christianity, however, the common practice of communing infants declined and disappeared by the eighth/ninth centuries, when the regular practice of Private Confession became a prerequisite for receiving Communion. Infants, who could not confess their sins verbally, were no longer communed. It was generally thought that they were capable of confessing and communing from the age of 7 or 8 years.

As Communion was separated from Baptism, the theological meaning of the ritual acts of anointing with the laying on of hands became unclear. Was it part of Baptism, or a preparation for Communion? Was the Holy Spirit given in Baptism, or given in the 'confirming'? Considerable debate ensued. Unfortunately, the unscriptural view prevailed that the Holy Spirit was not given (or incompletely given) in Baptism, and that Confirmation was a separate action by which the Holy Spirit was given. By the high Middle Ages this view resulted in Confirmation being designated one of the seven sacraments of the Church. As such, it was not necessarily understood as the rite of admission to Holy Communion, nor was it necessarily connected to instruction, but was seen as a sacrament in its own right, necessary for salvation.

Confirmation, Catechesis, and the Lutheran Reformation

Early in his Reformation writings Luther severely attacked such a view of Confirmation. He could find no divine institution in Scripture; therefore, no sure promise of grace was connected to the action by the Lord. Furthermore, the separation of the giving of the Holy Spirit into a separate action was an attack on the foundational Christian sacrament, Holy Baptism. According to Scripture, the Holy Spirit comes upon the Christian in fullness in Baptism according to the Lord's promise. In the Book of Concord, the Apology to the Augsburg Confession denies that Confirmation should be placed on the same level as Baptism, Communion, and Absolution, defining these sacraments as 'rites which have the command of God, and to which the promise of grace has been added' (Ap XIII:3). Confirmation clearly failed the test of this definition on both counts. The Apology merely recognises it as a 'rite received from the Fathers'.

At first, Luther and his co-workers were happy to continue the rite, if it were understood to be merely a churchly ceremony. In a sermon Luther once admitted: 'Confirmation should not be observed as the bishops desire it. Nevertheless we do not find fault if every pastor examines the faith of the children to see whether it is good and sincere, lays hands on them, and confirms them' (WA 11:66; Sermon, 15 Mar. 1523). However, it is clear that Luther's heart was not in it, and his occasional approval of various revisions of the rite was reluctant.

Luther was much more concerned with **catechesis**, the instruction of all Christians, young and old, in the basics of the faith as detailed in his two catechisms. In his two revisions of the Communion liturgy Luther stresses the need for Christians to be instructed and examined in the faith before they are to commune. In Wittenberg this instruction took place through weekday preaching in the city church. Three times a year Luther preached through the six chief parts of the catechism. Parents were responsible for bringing their children (and servants) to these catechism services. Later, such instruction would also take place in day schools, under the supervision of a schoolmaster. Once the parents were satisfied that their children had learnt what was taught, they brought them to the pastor for examination, Confession, and Absolution, after which the children were permitted to commune. The Lutheran Church binds herself to this practice in the Augsburg Confession: 'For among us masses [=the chief service of Holy Communion] are celebrated every Lord's Day and on the other festivals, in which the Sacrament is offered to those who wish to use it, after they have been examined and absolved' (AC XXIV:1; cf. Ap XV:40-41; I Cor. 11:27-32). The Small Catechism asserts the corollary: 'But those who are unwilling to learn it [the catechism] should be told that they deny Christ and are no Christians, neither should they be admitted to the Sacrament' (Preface 11).

In early Lutheranism, Confirmation as a separate liturgical rite simply ceased to exist in most places, inasmuch as it had no divine institution or promise of grace. Catechesis, however, was clearly mandated by God (e.g., Deut. 6:6-9; Ps. 78:5-8; Mt.

28:20), and received great attention. The 16th-century Lutheran church orders are reluctant to specify an age at which this should take place. When they do speak of one, it ranges from 7 to 12 years old. Although an initial, minimal amount of catechesis was required before ‘First Communion’, catechesis was understood to be a life-long process. As Christians regularly conversed with their pastor in private Confession and Absolution, he used the opportunity to continue examining their understanding of the faith.

Post-Reformation Developments

In most parts of early Lutheranism, the very word ‘Confirmation’ was offensive, carrying with it the considerable baggage of Roman Catholic abuse. But as nature abhors a vacuum, so also certain corners of the church were inclined to restore some ‘purified’ public rite of Confirmation. The motivations varied widely. Some orthodox and traditional churchmen felt that it would be a fitting culmination of the catechetical process.

On the other hand, it often brought to expression various corrupting movements that began to infect the Lutheran Church in the 17th and 18th centuries. Some Lutherans, influenced by the Reformed thinking of Martin Bucer (and others), thought of Confirmation as an opportunity for the Christian to ‘complete’ his Baptism by making the pledge to God that he was unable to do as an infant. This view of Baptism as a two-way covenant seriously distorts the Gospel. Adherents of Pietism looked down on Baptism as a left-over of mediaeval superstition, and saw Confirmation as an opportunity to make the public confession of faith that, in their view, really mattered. Later, as Rationalism began to destroy traditional Christian belief, Confirmation came to be viewed as a rite of passage in society. One significant result of all of these influences is that Confirmation came to be seen as the considered action of a mature individual (rather than as a testimony to God’s action). In German and Scandinavian Lutheranism by the 19th century, Confirmation rarely took place before the ‘child’ was 16-18 years old. In such state-church situations, Confirmation merged with public recognition of citizenship with all its rights and duties.



Confirmation Today

The wide-ranging developments of the 17th-19th centuries were clearly a departure from the Reformation. Confirmation in the ELCE and her sister churches today, having been affected by these diverse influences, no longer has the clarity of purpose found in Luther’s day. In the latter half of the 20th century, Lutheran Churches around the world revisited their practice of Confirmation, with the goal of recovering its original purposes. Many churches, recognising that it is unwise to withhold Communion from children until such a late age, proposed the separation of First Communion from the rite of Confirmation—the former taking place after minimal instruction when the child is quite young, and the latter taking place in recognition

of the completion of a fuller course of catechesis. It is difficult, however, to see how such a separation can avoid the dangers of the mediaeval practice that the Reformation originally rejected. Once separated from Communion, the rite of Confirmation will inevitably be viewed as ‘sacramental’ in its own right, or as a completion of an ‘imperfect’ Baptism. Conversely, if First Communion is separated from thorough instruction, we violate our pastoral commitment to responsible administration of the Lord’s Supper. Furthermore, certain practical problems have arisen from the new diversity of practice. No longer is there a uniformity of age at which children commune for the first time. As families move from one congregation to another, this diversity can cause resentment and confusion.

Confirmation, as currently practised in the ELCE and many of our sister churches, is a public rite of recognition that a certain course of instruction and examination has been completed and that the child is now ready to receive Communion. These aspects of our practice are healthy and appropriate. However, certain dangers remain in our present practice, relating firstly to the age at which it is commonly held, and secondly to the substance of the rite itself.

1. Confirmation in the ELCE and her sister churches has traditionally taken place at the age of 13-14, or older.
 - a. Historically considered, this is extremely late to delay a child’s first reception of the Sacrament.
 - b. Although some arguments may be put forward in favour of such a late age, it was originally due to pietistic, rationalistic, and political reasons, which have nothing to do with the Gospel.
 - c. There is no scriptural or confessional reason to withhold the Sacrament from a child who is able to be instructed, examined, and absolved.
 - d. The pre-teen and teenage years can be among the most spiritually difficult times in a person’s life, a time when the strength afforded by the Sacrament is most needed.
2. The rite of Confirmation, as used in the ELCE (and derived from LCMS sources), includes a series of elements that may perpetuate certain dangerous misunderstandings about Confirmation:
 - a. Although the Holy Spirit is certainly given whenever God’s Word is spoken (Jn 6:63; Eph. 6:17), the laying on of hands in the rite of Confirmation with a prayer for a unique gift of the Holy Spirit is commonly misunderstood as a ‘completion’ of Baptism, or a separate sacramental act. Baptism, which bestows the Spirit in fullness (Jn 3:5; Acts 2:38-39; I Cor. 6:11; 12:13; Tit. 3:5-6), needs no completion—except bodily death and resurrection on the Last Day.
 - b. The language of ‘confirming the baptismal covenant’ implies that Baptism is a two-way covenant requiring some commitment on our part to be valid. Scripturally and confessionally, however, Baptism is entirely God’s work, simply to be received by faith (Jn 3:5-6; Rom. 6:3-4; Eph. 2:1, 8-9; Col. 2:12-13; Tit. 3:5).



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- c. The pledge of lifelong faithfulness to the Lutheran Church required of the confirmand is dubious. The Augsburg Confession (art. XXVII) is quite critical of such pledges, particularly when they are exacted from children, and when they are not voluntary but forced. Furthermore, the nature of the Lord's Supper as a gracious gift is obscured when its reception is made conditional upon such a vow.
 - d. Such pledges also wrongly imply that Confirmation makes one a member of the Church. Although our church structures sometimes speak of 'confirmed' or 'voting' membership for certain purposes, these are purely human arrangements. Before God it is Holy Baptism that truly and fully initiates one into Christ's Church (I Cor. 12:13; Eph. 4:4-6).
 - e. In the midst of these distorting emphases, the primary focus on catechesis and reception of Holy Communion is obscured.

These common misunderstandings demonstrate what difficulty we have as fallen people in accepting the truly free nature of God's grace towards us. It is important, therefore, that the rite should not play into the hands of our fallen nature, but should proclaim the Gospel with clarity.

Proposals

In the light of the foregoing we make the following proposals:

1. The pastors and congregations of the ELCE must renew their commitment to life-long catechesis. One never 'graduates' from studying God's Word and deepening one's faith and understanding. Similarly, Communion attendance should never be viewed as 'automatic' for any member of the church, but is always to be undertaken with repentance and faith in the Body and Blood of Christ given for the forgiveness of sins.
2. The ELCE's current practice that a person's first reception of Holy Communion in our church be preceded by intensive catechetical instruction and marked by a public rite of acceptance to the Lord's Supper should be continued as a useful norm. Such a process and rite may or may not be called 'confirmation'.
3. Recognising that withholding the Sacrament from younger children may not always be justifiable, pastors and parents should be encouraged to begin the catechetical and examination process at the age that is suitable to each individual child. Holy Scripture places upon parents the primary responsibility to raise their children in the faith, and pastors are called to assist them in this duty.
4. In the absence of a specific Word of God on the matter, congregations must learn to be tolerant of a diversity of practice in such matters as the age of 'confirmation'.
5. In our mobile society, Lutheran families who visit another congregation must be reminded to speak with the pastor before approaching the altar for the first time. In such pastoral conversation, each child's circumstances can be clearly



explained and considered. Such families should not assume that the practices of this congregation will be identical to their home church, and should not take offence at the differences.

6. Members of the congregation should trust the pastor's judgement in dealing with unusual circumstances.
7. As the ELCE has been observing the current LCMS hymnal project, revision of the Confirmation rite should not be undertaken until we see what they are proposing.
8. Unity of understanding and practice in this matter would be improved if the pastors and members of the ELCE would carefully review together such basic teachings as the nature and benefits of Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper, grace and justification, catechesis and confession of faith.