



Confirmation and First Communion in the Lutheran Church

A Historical Survey from the Early Church to the Present with questions
and comments on our current practice
March 2009

I. Confirmation in the Early Church

In the Early Church (to the fifth century A.D.) “confirmation” did not exist as we understand it today. Confirmation was actually a part of the rite of Baptism. Generally speaking, adult confirmands would undergo an extensive period of catechesis (typically three years), and then at the Easter Vigil would be baptized. They were then “confirmed” in this baptismal faith by means of chrism, prayers, the sign of the cross, and the laying on of hands. Then on Easter morning they would partake of their first Communion. Baptisms were done by the area bishop. Because entire families would undertake this catechesis and baptism, it was also relatively common in this early period for infants to receive their first Communion with their parents.

II. Confirmation in the Middle Ages

- A) With the growth of the Church, and especially after the legalization of Christianity in the early fourth century, the practice of infant baptisms became much more common. Because of the rapid growth of the Church, the bishops began to delegate the rite of Baptism to parish priests. In the Eastern churches priests were permitted to confirm also, provided that the chrism had been blessed by the bishop. In the Western churches, however, only the bishop was allowed to confirm. Thus, where the Roman liturgy came into use, it became much more common to make baptism and confirmation separate rites. The idea gradually came into place that confirmation was a complement to baptism. Baptism was where sins were forgiven, and confirmation was where the Holy Spirit was given. Later on this rite came to be considered necessary for salvation.
- B) By the 12th century men such as Hugo of St. Victor were calling confirmation the second sacrament. Other medieval theologians followed suit. In November of 1439 at the Council of Florence, confirmation was designated a sacrament through the papal decree *Pro Armenis* of Eugene IV. It was from that time forward a part of the Roman sacramental system, bestowed grace, was equal in power to the other sacraments, and could only be conferred by a bishop. It was also considered an objective rite which operated *ex opere operato*, that is, regardless of the faith of the recipient.

III. Confirmation in the Reformation Period

- A) The Roman abuses of Confirmation had made Confirmation suspect in the minds of many, particularly Luther himself. Luther at different times called Confirmation: monkey business (*Affenspiel*), fanciful deception (*Lügenstand*), and mumbo-jumbo (*Gaukelwerk*). Luther’s objections to the Roman Rite of Confirmation included:
- 1) It lacked the command and promise of the Lord.
 - 2) It had no Scriptural basis.
 - 3) The Romanists used Confirmation to deny that the Holy Spirit was given at Baptism, and that the Holy Spirit could only be given through the chrism and laying on of hands.
 - 4) The Romanists argued that confirmation “completed” baptism.

- B) The Lutheran Confessions followed a similar lead on confirmation. The Augsburg Confession, for instance, did not include confirmation among the sacraments. We can also find in the *Apology to the Augsburg Confession* the following:
- Confirmation and extreme unction are rites received from the Fathers which even the church does not require as necessary for salvation since they do not have the command of God. Hence it is useful to distinguish these from the earlier ones which have an express command from God and a clear promise of grace. Apology of the Augsburg Confession XIII, Tappert, p. 211.*
- C) Nonetheless, confirmation had a place in the Lutheran Church generally speaking. As early as the *Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520) Luther thought it "sufficient to regard confirmation as a certain churchly rite or sacramental ceremony, similar to other ceremonies, such as the blessing of water and the like." (*Luther's Works*, vol. 36, p. 92) Luther did not disapprove of pastors examining the faith of children and giving them a blessing, as long as it was not understood that this was completing baptism. It would certainly be fair to say, however, that confirmation did not play a significant role in Luther's understanding of the reform of the church. He would have been fine if it had been dropped altogether, and it is difficult to find places where Luther specifically encourages its use.
- D) There are many different types of confirmation and pre-communion study that became common in the Reformation period. Some followed an intensely catechetical format, where the pastor would examine the confirmands for hours. Others were more sacramental in character, which focused on the blessing given at confirmation. Still others followed the typical Lutheran understanding of Reformation: only change those things which are a hindrance to the Gospel. Thus for some, the attempt was made to retain as much as possible of the Roman Rite, while at the same time emphasizing the catechetical focus and the blessings given in Baptism and the Sacrament of the Altar.

General Observations About the Reformation Period

What one sees by and large is an almost complete lack of uniformity in the Lutheran practice of confirmation during this period. If one were to generalize, we would say:

- A) Lutherans rejected confirmation as a sacrament
- B) It was understood that there must be some form of instruction before confirmation and/or first Communion
- C) There was some connection to both Baptism and Communion, although what that connection was varied widely
- D) The age of first Communion was significantly earlier than today's practice. Under German law, it was at the oldest age 12. Roman canon law placed it somewhere between 7-12. It was very rare to see confirmation older than age 12.

IV. Confirmation in the Age of Orthodoxy, Pietism and Rationalism

A) Orthodoxy

The practice of confirmation in Lutheran churches continued to spread, although at a slower pace, partly because of the ravages of the Thirty Years' War (1618-48). At this time a great majority of Lutheran Churches in Germany and Scandinavia continued to prepare children for first Communion through catechetical instruction and without a rite. Public confirmation was retained in some areas during this period, but it was not particularly widespread. We also find private confirmation coming into place during the period in some areas. Because of the impact of the Counter-Reformation, and the tendency of some to have their church membership change on the basis of the political situation, some churches began the practice of requiring a vow to remain faithful to the Lutheran Church. This did not become particularly common until the 18th century, however. There was also a general failing on the part of the church at this time in the catechesis of children. Catechetical sermons fell into disuse, and the reading of the catechism in many places also went by the wayside. The idea of basic instruction in the faith gave way to more

sophistical teaching on theology. It is also near the end of this period that the idea of confirmation as a covenant renewal began to come into place.

B) Pietism

We find under Pietism a shift began to take place in confirmation. Under orthodoxy confirmation spread in some areas, and died out on others. With the rise of Pietism under Jacob Philip Spener (1635-1705) we find confirmation coming to the forefront, but with a different purpose. Pietism is the anti-orthodox movement which began in the mid-17th century. It is most commonly known for its emphasis on a heart-felt piety, the practice of piety, separation from the unconverted, and the unity of like-minded believers. For men such as Spener, confirmation thus served several purposes:

- 1) To demonstrate that the confirmand was truly converted.
- 2) The rise of an individual memory verse for each confirmand, to emphasize the individualistic character of the faith.
- 3) To renew the baptismal covenant. This was often done by a vow and a confession of faith. Because of the subjective nature of pietism, Spener wanted to have the confirmands to give a personal testimony of their faith. Because of the low education level of many of the children, this was often simply done by the cultured class, and the common children would simply use the Creed.
- 4) Because of the desire for an individual testimony and vow, and a deemphasis on memorization, many Pietists began to urge that only those who could read should be confirmed.

The results of Pietism upon the rite of Confirmation can be summarized as follows:

- 1) Confirmation's subjective element became its chief characteristic. This was foreign to the vast majority of early Lutheran models of confirmation.
- 2) Children were now asked to renew their baptismal covenant. Individual confessions and personal vows were encouraged.
- 3) The catechumen was expected to examine himself on whether or not he was truly a Christian, and whether or not he could "discern" the body and blood of the Lord. This resulted in the age for catechumens to go up. The age under Pietism, thus, became 14-16 years old.

C) Rationalism

Rationalism is the movement which tried to make everything in Christianity conform to reason and natural revelation. Rationalism, therefore, de-emphasized the supernatural, miracles, and were generally anti-sacramental. We find in rationalism an attempt to separate connection with the Church (baptism) and connection to a local fellowship (confirmation). Because the examinations often became so long at this time, the practice of separating the examination from the rite of confirmation came into place. When the pastor confirmed the catechumen, he would then give him a bible verse, hymn verse or some other folk saying to encourage them. Baptism under rationalism became not a Church event, but a family event like a marriage. Confirmation also became associated with civic duty, economic privileges, and the "coming of age" of the catechumen.

V. Confirmation Comes to the United States

With the Lutheran immigrants coming to the United States in the 19th century, this hodge-podge of rites, practices, and theories behind confirmation all came over on the boats. In the 19th century there was a revival of confessional Lutheranism which went contrary to both Pietism and rationalism. We can see in men such as Claus Harms, for example, that there was an attempt to regulate confirmation and make it more orthodox.

We can thus find in the Missouri Synod elements of all of these periods of church history in what we now consider to be the standard Lutheran rite of confirmation.

The rite of confirmation as it currently stands may be found on p. 272 of *Lutheran Service Book*.

VI. What does the catechism say about worthy reception of communion?

Who receives this sacrament worthily?

Fasting and bodily preparation are certainly fine outward training. But that person is truly worthy and well prepared who has faith in these words: "Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." But anyone who does not believe these words or doubts them is unworthy and unprepared, for the words "for you" require all hearts to believe.

Our Current Practice (excerpt from pastoral letter)

Pastoral practice regarding First Communion:

That Messiah Lutheran Church admit children to Holy Communion when the pastor, the child, the parents and at least one elder all concur that the child is prepared to receive Christ's Body and Blood in Holy Communion. "Preparation" shall include but not be limited to a clear confession of faith in the Gospel by means of reciting by heart the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, and the Lord's Prayer; by being examined and absolved by the pastor (Individual Confession and Absolution), and by verbally expressing their desire to receive Christ's Body and Blood for the forgiveness of sins.

Pastoral practice regarding Confirmation:

That Messiah Lutheran Church confirm those children in the Christian Faith who can recite by heart the Small Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther with Explanation, who have been examined and absolved, and who are able to confess the faith and answer the questions placed upon confirmands in the Rite of Confirmation found in the Lutheran Service Book.

Rationale:

The reason for this proposed practice is simple: It is of great benefit for all Christians to receive Christ's Body and Blood, and that we should be about giving our children Jesus as much as possible, and as soon as possible.

The challenges for this proposed policy are several:

- a. By separating confirmation and first communion, we run the risk of denigrating the importance of the rite of confirmation.
- b. This practice, while gaining acceptance in the LCMS as a whole, is not universally accepted, and does require explanation.
- c. Because this is based on the confession of faith of the individual and not an arbitrary age, it makes the practice appear random, when in fact this is more consistent with our understanding of worthiness of receiving the Sacrament.

What this means in practical terms is that we are giving parents and our congregation the option of offering their children first communion *before* they receive the rite of confirmation. Confirmation under this practice will move to an older age, probably 5th to 8th grade. This is a change for us at Messiah, and it is not a change that comes lightly.

We have a fairly long history of tying confirmation and first communion together in the Missouri Synod. That is, more or less, what the practice has been for a couple hundred years. However, the longer history in our church body is much more varied. Luther himself believed and taught that children should be communing at seven to eight years old, and confirmation wasn't even practiced in much of Lutheranism in the 16th and 17th centuries.

So how did we get to this point? The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod in its 2004 convention approved the adoption of a new hymnal, entitled *Lutheran Service Book*. We have adopted this as our congregational hymnal, and have enjoyed using it for nearly three years at this point. As a part of that process, the LCMS adopted the rite of confirmation *and* a separate rite of first communion. This has gained significant ground in our church body recently, especially since the advent of LSB.

Lamb of God and Our Savior's in Burlington both practice early communion, as well as several parishes in Racine. There are also some significant parishes in the South Wisconsin District that practice early communion, including Trinity in Sheboygan (one of the oldest congregations in the district)

How then do we determine age for confirmation?

The purpose behind changing our practice is to get away from thinking of confirmation as being tied to a specific age. Generally speaking, we are moving toward confirmation in the middle school years, but it could be done either younger or older.

Should confirmation and first communion be separated? Why or Why Not?

I have come to the conclusion that they should be separated for this reason: there is great teaching benefit in having a specific period of instruction in the middle school years (confirmation instruction historically), *but* there are many good theological reasons for communing children at a younger age. I am suggesting roughly 7-9 years old for first communion.

Conclusion

My prayer is that this practice will deepen our love for Christ's Sacrament of the Altar, for teaching our children the faith, and will serve to strengthen the bond between our young people and their congregation. God grant it, for Jesus' sake!

Pastor Todd Peperkorn
 Messiah Lutheran Church
 Kenosha, Wisconsin
 St. Joseph, Guardian of Jesus (March 19, 2009)

Bibliography for further study:

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First Communion Prior to Confirmation (from LSB Agenda, pp. 25-27)

Address to the Congregation

P Beloved in the Lord, in Holy Baptism these young people were born again as God's children and received into His Church. As a further gift of His love for us, our Lord Jesus Christ has given His Church the Sacrament of the Altar and invites His children to receive this Sacrament in faith for the forgiveness of their sins. The apostle Paul reminds us, "Let a person examine himself and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup," and "as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes." These candidates have received instruction and have been examined by the pastor regarding their sin and their understanding of the Sacrament of the Altar.

Address to the Candidates

P You are about to be admitted to the Lord's Table. Holy Scripture describes the life of the Church and every baptized Christian with these words: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." You are invited by our Lord to come regularly to hear His Word and receive His Sacrament. You will continue to be instructed and nurtured in the Christian faith and life. You are invited to confess your sins and receive the comfort of Holy Absolution. All this will help you live as the child of God you have been made through Holy Baptism.

In testimony of this faith and confession, I now ask you:

P Do you believe in God, the Father Almighty, in Jesus Christ, His only Son our Lord, and in the Holy Spirit?

R *Yes, I believe.*

P Do you believe that Jesus Christ, true God and true man, is your Lord?

R *Yes, I believe.*

P Do you believe that you are a sinner?

R *Yes, I believe.*

P Do you believe that Jesus Christ died for you and shed His blood for you on the cross for the forgiveness of all your sins?

R *Yes, I believe.*

P Do you believe that in the Lord's Supper He gives you His true body and blood for the forgiveness of all your sins and to strengthen your faith in Him and your love toward others?

R *Yes, I believe.*

P Do you intend to continue to hear and receive the instruction of your Lord, confess your sins, and receive the Lord's Supper faithfully throughout your life?

R *Yes, with the help of God.*

P I therefore invite you to the Lord's Supper to receive Christ's precious body and blood for the forgiveness of all your sins, in the name of the Father and of the T Son and of the Holy Spirit.

C Amen.

P Parents, (sponsors), and members of the congregation, the whole Church shares with you the responsibility and concern for the ongoing instruction and spiritual care of these young people. I now ask you, will you intercede for them in prayer and, as much as you are able, give them your counsel and aid that, in communion with the Church, they may grow up to lead a godly life to the praise and honor of Jesus Christ? Then answer: We will, with the help of God.

C We will, with the help of God.

Stand

P Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, whose Son Jesus Christ loved the young and called them to Himself, we ask You to bless these young people. Strengthen them in the faith through the Sacrament of Christ's body and blood so that they may grow spiritually and bring forth the fruits of faith in a life of love towards others to the praise and honor of Your holy name; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

C Amen.

P We rejoice with thankful hearts in your confession of faith. As you continue to hear the Lord's Word and receive His holy Supper, He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. Peace T be with you.

C Amen.