Confirmation:
A Theological Position Paper
for the Diocese of Christ our Hope

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In common with other Churches of the West, modern Anglicanism has lacked clarity about the meaning and function of the rite of Confirmation. The difficulties with our understanding of Confirmation involve at least three different sorts of issues: 1) liturgical issues resulting from the unstable mixture of functions that have been compounded in Western forms of Confirmation; 2) theological issues arising from the efforts to define Confirmation as a second stage of Christian initiation distinct from Holy Baptism; and 3) the practical issues of how to administer Confirmation at a time of life when it can manifest its intended meaning(s) in the life of the person being confirmed and in the life of the whole Christian community.[1]

Liturgical History

Holy Baptism is the original full rite of Christian initiation. The New Testament writings suggest no other rite or act of initiation beyond the water bath administered in the name of Jesus and (later?) in the trinitarian Name (Acts 2:38; Matthew 28:19). Baptism is administered for the forgiveness of sins and the receiving of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38) and confers union with Christ in his death and resurrection (Romans 6:3–5), regeneration (John 3:5; Titus 3:5),[2] and adoption as children of God. Despite a long and catholic tradition of being adduced as evidence for an apostolic rite of Confirmation (as in the preface to the rite of Confirmation in the *Texts for Common Prayer*), the post-baptismal laying on of apostolic hands administered to the Samaritans in Acts 8 and to the Ephesian disciples in Acts 19 is found in no other scriptural account of Baptism and cannot be cited as a direct precedent for the later rite of Confirmation.[3] It is not until

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[1] Daniel Stevick, *Baptismal Moments, Baptismal Meanings* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1987), 54–55.

[2] Cf. Ray R. Sutton, *Signed, Sealed, and Delivered* (Houston, TX: Classical Anglican Press, 2001) for a thorough discussion of the classical Anglican view of baptismal regeneration.

[3] While it could apply to a post-baptismal action, the laying on of hands noted in Hebrews 6:2 is given no specific reference in the text. The reference in 2 Timothy 1:6 to the laying on of hands administered to Timothy by the Apostle Paul likewise is given no specific reference, though it seems more likely to refer to a rite of ordination or of commissioning to apostolic ministry than to baptism. It is regrettable that the 1928 American and proposed English Prayer Books, as well as the 2005 edition of the Prayer Book of the Reformed Episcopal Church, open the Confirmation rite with a reference to Acts 8; and that catechism of the Anglican Church in North America, *To Be A Christian*, refers to the text (adding Acts 19:6) in the answer to a question regarding the grace given in Confirmation. Neither of these texts from Acts refers to an apostolic rite or act of Confirmation. Cf. G. W. H. Lampe, *The Seal of the Spirit: A Study in the Doctrine of Baptism and Confirmation in the New Testament and the Fathers* (London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1951). See also James D. G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970). Dunn disagrees with Lampe's particular interpretation of the apostolic

the late second and early third centuries that we find evidence for the actions of anointing and the laying on of hands added to the water bath of baptism, including in the writings of Tertullian and in the text known as the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus, which likely reflects liturgical practice in Rome in the early third century. The earliest texts of this document are in the *Canons of Hippolytus* (late fourth century) and the Latin text of *Apostolic Tradition* (late fifth century). In both of these forms of the text, the triple immersion of baptism *per se* is followed by a presbyteral anointing and by an episcopal laying on of hands as well as a second post-baptismal anointing, this one administered by the bishop.

With the expansion of the Church beyond major urban centers and into the provincial towns and villages of the Roman Empire in Western Europe, bishops came no longer to preside simply over the congregation or congregations of a single major city but over larger geographical areas eventually known as dioceses, and the pastoral care of outlying congregations was committed to presbyters. No longer could the bishop be present at every baptism, so the baptismal rite itself was divided in the West, something that did not occur in the East, where dioceses remained small and where presbyters could preside at the entire baptismal rite, performing the anointings using episcopally-blessed chrism. In the Western Church, presbyters presided at the water bath and the first of the two post-baptismal anointings, while the laying on of hands and the second post-baptismal anointing was reserved to the bishop, to be performed (if he were not present at the baptism itself) at some later time. These post-baptismal actions reserved to the bishop came to be known as Confirmation (*confirmatio*), a term that first begins to be used in this way in the late fourth century. This bifurcation of the originally unitary act of Christian initiation (baptism with chrismation and the laying on of hands) was the liturgical practice of the Western Church from the late fourth or early fifth century into the sixteenth century.

The fifteenth-century Bohemian Brethren rejected the medieval rite of Confirmation, substituting instead a rite in which those baptized in infancy received the laying on of hands after having been catechized and publicly examined in the catechism. Luther rejected Confirmation wholesale, though he did not object if parish pastors wished to institute a rite along the lines of that of the Bohemian Brethren, as Lutheran churches did in most places. Martin Bucer, the reformer of Strassburg, likewise rejected the medieval rite in favor of a laying on of hands that followed catechesis and public examination, and in the liturgy that he prepared for Hermann von Wied, the reforming archbishop of Cologne, Bucer recommended that the laying on of hands be performed by a bishop on account of its greater solemnity. John Calvin as well rejected the medieval rite in favor of what he (erroneously) believed to be the original form of Confirmation in the early Church, viz. the laying on of episcopal hands after catechesis. In preparing the reformed rites of the first Book of Common Prayer (1549), Thomas Cranmer followed the magisterial Reformation consensus. While—unlike the Reformed rites—he retained the post-

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laying on of hands of the baptized Samaritans in Acts 8, but agrees with him that the text provides no evidence either for Confirmation or for a pentecostalist understanding of baptism in the Holy Spirit.

baptismal anointing in the baptismal rite, he joined this (usually presbyteral) anointing with his translation of the prayer that accompanied the episcopal anointing in the Confirmation rite of the Sarum Use, calling upon God, who "hath regenerate" the newly-baptized child "by water and the Holy Ghost," to anoint the child "with the unction of his Holy Spirit," thereby emphasizing the character of Baptism as full initiation into the Body of Christ by water and the Holy Spirit. Like the continental Reformers, Cranmer intended Confirmation to follow the catechesis of those baptized in infancy, and in the 1549 Prayer Book, as in every subsequent Prayer Book until the late twentieth century, the rite of Confirmation immediately follows the Catechism.[4]

Theological Issues

There has been considerable confusion and controversy regarding the theology of Confirmation in Anglicanism since at least the nineteenth century, resolving to this fundamental question: does Confirmation symbolize and effect a radically new indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the soul?[5]

In the writings of the early Fathers, any and all of the constituent parts of the baptismal rite—the water bath, the anointings, or the laying on of hands—can be designated the seal of the Spirit. But there is little that is definitive about this or that particularizes the giving of the Holy Spirit to a single action within the rite. Instead, the entire baptismal rite, in all its constituent parts that emerged in the post-apostolic Church, was considered to seal the baptized with the Holy Spirit.[6] It was only in the Western Church, with its separation of the unitary rite of Christian initiation into two components, the first of which could be administered by a presbyter and the second of which required administration by a bishop, that a potential particularization of the giving of the Holy Spirit arose. In general, Confirmation was understood in the West as a strengthening in the Holy Spirit, rather than as initial or new indwelling of the Holy Spirit.[7] This strengthening was in part believed to prepare the confirmand for the spiritual warfare of the adult Christian life. Richard Hooker asserts a similar understanding of Confirmation against its nonconformist puritan detractors (*Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, V.67, "Of confirmation after baptism"). The historic Prayer Book rite demonstrates a similar understanding of Confirmation as a

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[4] The rite of Confirmation in the ACNA's *Texts for Common Prayer* notes that those who wish to be confirmed must "know and affirm the Nicene Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments; and must have received instruction in the Old and New Testaments "and the Catechism of the Church."

[5] Oliver Chase Quick, *The Christian Sacraments* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1927), 181.

[6] Cf. Lampe, ibid. This should not distract us from the fact that the New Testament knows nothing of the additional actions administered after the water bath of baptism; hence, any person baptized with water in the trinitarian Name, regardless of whether he has received post-baptismal chrismation and the laying on of hands, is fully a member of Christ's holy catholic Church. Cf. the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral, item 3 (or c).

[7] E.g., Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III.72. The notion of Confirmation as the *augmentum gratiae* of the Holy Spirit may also be found in medieval Western Catholic sacramental theology.

strengthening and a prayer for the further graces of the Holy Spirit, including the seven-fold gifts: "Strengthen them, we beseech thee, O Lord, with the Holy Ghost the Comforter, and daily increase in them thy manifold gifts of grace; the spirit of wisdom and understanding; the spirit of counsel and ghostly strength; the spirit of knowledge and true godliness; and fill them, O Lord, with the spirit of thy holy fear, now and for ever."

The principal challenge to this classical Anglican view of Confirmation came from a strain within Anglo-Catholic sacramental theology that asserted that Confirmation (specifically, the episcopal anointing), not Baptism, is the sacrament that confers the gift of the Holy Spirit.[8] According to this understanding, Baptism is principally a rite meant to prepare its recipient for the gift of the Holy Spirit that is received in Confirmation. However, as explicitly stated in the prayer accompanying the post-baptismal chrismation in the 1549 Prayer Book and as further noted throughout the baptismal rite as found in later historic Prayer Books, as well as in the Articles of Religion (Article XXVII), the classical Anglican understanding of Baptism is that it is the sacrament whereby God effects the regeneration of the baptized by water *and the Holy Spirit* and whereby the Holy Spirit is given to those who are baptized.[9] The baptismal rite of the Anglican Church in North America's *Texts for Common Prayer* stands within this classical Anglican tradition when it states that "we will ask our heavenly Father that these candidates, being baptized with water, may be filled with the Holy Spirit, born again, and received as living members of Christ's holy Church" and in the alternative formula accompanying the post-baptismal chrismation, "you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever." The ACNA rite of Confirmation also recognizes this in stating that "God's grace is imparted in Baptism where we are made God's children by adoption and given the Holy Spirit." The text of the rite of Confirmation makes it clear that "through the laying on of hands...the Holy Spirit may fill them *more and more* for their ministry in the Church and in the world" (emphasis added).

Thus, to the question posed at the beginning of this section, "Does Confirmation symbolize and effect a radically new indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the soul?" classical Anglicanism (and the ACNA's rite of Confirmation) answers, "No."

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[8] The representative exponents of this view were Gregory Dix and L. S. Thornton.

[9] As Lampe asserts, the separation of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit from Baptism or of regeneration from the indwelling of the Holy Spirit introduces a separation within the Trinity in the work of salvation and suggests a view of the Holy Spirit as a power rather than a Person. Cf. Romans 8:15–17; Galatians 4:4–6 on the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in those whom God has adopted in Jesus Christ. Baptism is the visible sign and seal not only of the forgiveness of sin but also of "our adoption to be the sons of God by the Holy Ghost" (Article XXVII).

Practical Considerations

As we have noted, in the early third-century baptismal liturgy of the Roman Church found in *Apostolic Tradition*, all baptized persons received baptism *per se* (the water bath), a post-baptismal anointing, and the episcopal laying on of hands. While we have explicit evidence for the baptism of infant children of Christians by the early third century (and implicit evidence in New Testament household baptisms and in the practice of Jewish proselyte baptism of families), not only the theologically normative but the usual candidates for baptism remained adult converts for the first few centuries. But coincidental with the wider growth of the Church in towns, villages, and rural areas was an increase in the numbers of young children brought to baptism, so that while the theologically and liturgically normative candidate remained a confessing adult convert, the usual candidate became an infant. This change exerted its own influence on the liturgical development of Confirmation from the episcopal acts of the originally unified baptismal liturgy alongside the growth of territorially large dioceses and the delegation of pastoral cures to presbyters. In the medieval Western Church, the delay between Baptism and Confirmation could range from days to years. At first, parents were encouraged to have their baptized children confirmed as early as possible, preferably by three years of age, though this later lengthened to about seven years, as an "age of discretion" came to be emphasized.[10]

These developments led to the anomaly of Christians, baptized in infancy, who had never taken baptismal vows for themselves. It was this anomaly that the Reformers corrected by creating what was essentially an innovative rite of Confirmation. The rite of Confirmation in the medieval Western Church consisted in the episcopal chrismation of a person baptized in infancy, with the incidental imposition of the bishop's hands as well. There was no renewal or reaffirmation of those vows which had been taken on the person's behalf at his baptism when an infant. As noted, Cranmer moved the prayer that accompanied this episcopally-administered chrismation, a prayer for the previously-baptized to be filled with the Holy Spirit, to the rite of Baptism instead. So the rite of Confirmation became specifically a time when the baptized, upon completion of their being catechized in Scripture and the teachings of the Church, *confirmed* their baptismal vows while at the same time the Church *confirmed* their status as members of the Body of Christ through Baptism.[11]

[10] Though exceptional, immediate post-baptismal Confirmation remained a possibility in the late medieval Western Church. The princess Elizabeth—the future queen, Elizabeth I—was baptized, confirmed, and received her first communion when she was three days old, in 1533.

[11] This innovative use of the word "confirmation," as applying to the renewing by those previously baptized of vows taken for them by proxy at baptism in infancy, was introduced to the character of the reformed rites of Confirmation as a profession of faith, a character not explicitly expressed in the medieval rite of Confirmation but that was central to the patristic baptismal rites.

It is appropriate at this point to address another misconception, and this a fairly recent one regarding Confirmation, namely that it is the rite of "ordination to the laity." Persons are made Christians, members of the Body of Christ and of the royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:5; Rev. 1:6; 5:10) by Baptism. If there be a rite of ordination to the *laos* of God, it is *Baptism*—not Confirmation. Confirmation should instead be understood as a commissioning to the ministry of apostolic witness, as it were a call-up to active duty of the baptized soldier of Christ. And it is appropriate that this commissioning occur by the laying on of hands of the bishop as the chief pastor of the local apostolic community.

To whom should Confirmation be administered? In the reformed English Church, the rite could be administered whenever the catechesis of those baptized in infancy had been completed, usually by late childhood and as early as the late medieval standard age of seven. Over the course of later centuries, the age tended to move into adolescence, so that in some Anglican dioceses at the present time, it is customary for persons baptized in infancy to undergo Confirmation in their middle teenage years or later.[12] While practice varies, given that Confirmation represents the taking on of baptismal vows (with all their tremendous implications), and that it is the occasion for the mature ("adult") profession of faith in Jesus Christ for those baptized in infancy, it is appropriate to delay Confirmation until late adolescence or even early adulthood. Decisions of when and whom to confirm will require a great deal of pastoral sensitivity. There may be early adolescents who are able with some maturity to profess their Christian faith and undertake to perform their baptismal vows, and it may be imprudent to delay their Confirmation. On the other hand, there will be those who should perhaps wait until their late teens or early twenties, once they are beginning to take on the responsibilities of adulthood in wider society. Because of the various ages at which baptized persons come to confessing faith, it also seems prudent not to set an expectation of Confirmation at a particular age for all youth or young adults.

While the normal (as opposed to the theologically normative) candidates for Holy Baptism will continue to be the children of believing Christians in most of our parishes and congregations, it is also true that there are growing numbers of adult converts to the Christian faith—those for whom the unitary baptismal rite in its fullness is theologically and liturgically intended. When possible, it may be best to delay the baptism of such persons until an episcopal visit, when they may undergo the full rite of Christian initiation as practiced by the patristic Church (baptism, chrismation, and the episcopal laying on of hands) in one service. The *Texts for Common Prayer* include a rite of Holy Baptism with Confirmation, Reception, and Reaffirmation that provides for this.[13]

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[12] A mid-nineteenth century portrait of North Carolina bishop Levi Silliman Ives depicts him presiding at the Confirmation of several girls who appear to be in late adolescence.

[13] The ACNA rite makes the unitary character of Holy Baptism/Confirmation particularly clear. Immediately after the newly-baptized are welcomed into the fellowship of the Church, the bishop says, "Let us now pray for those who have made an adult profession of Faith and who seek the laying on of hands." This phrasing at once seamlessly

Remaining Issues

In the patristic Church, Christian initiation consisted of baptism, chrismation and the laying on of hands, and first communion. (The newly-baptized were given milk and honey as well as the consecrated bread and wine in some patristic rites.) A similar discipline, of not admitting to communion until after Baptism and episcopal chrismation (Confirmation), obtained in the medieval Church. The same discipline obtains in the Eastern Churches and informs their practice of pedocommunion from the day of the child's baptism and chrismation (cf. the previous reference to the baptism of the princess Elizabeth as an example of late medieval Western pedocommunion). Until fairly recently, Anglicans had to be "confirmed or desirous of Confirmation" in order to receive Holy Communion. (Being "desirous of Confirmation" was the canonical loophole by which Anglicans in the American colonies could receive communion, there being no resident bishop and no episcopal visitations from England for nearly a hundred-seventy years, until the establishment of an American episcopate beginning in the 1780s.) While it is beyond the scope of this essay, it is worth considering whether, given that in Holy Baptism we are "filled with the Holy Spirit, born again, and received as living members of Christ's holy Church," the traditional practice of delaying first communion until Confirmation or the more recent practice of a quasi-rite of "first communion" for younger children between Baptism and Confirmation is theologically defensible.[14]

The reception of those who had received baptism in other Christian traditions became an issue for Anglicans after the Restoration of 1662, when those who had been baptized by Presbyterian, Independent (Congregationalist), or Baptist ministers during the Commonwealth and subsequently might join the established Church.[15] Such persons were, like those baptized in the Church of England, to be confirmed by a bishop. This was the discipline adopted both by the Scottish Episcopal Church and the later Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States. By the mid-twentieth century, some Anglican Churches made provision in their canons for the

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makes the transition from the baptismal rite proper to the episcopal rite of Confirmation and deftly includes not only the newly-baptized adults (and older adolescents) but others who are being confirmed, received, or who are making a (post-Confirmation) reaffirmation of baptismal vows.

[14] This raises rather acutely the question of how we are to understand what St. Paul means by "rightly discerning the [Lord's] body" (1 Cor. 11:29); whether this means the cognitive apprehension of the eucharistic Body of Christ, or whether it refers in context to a recognition of the ecclesial Body of Christ; and whether excluding baptized children from communion might not be a form of not rightly discerning the ecclesial Body of Christ, to which all the baptized belong.

[15] Given the practice under Elizabeth and James to admit ministers ordained in foreign Reformed Churches to benefices in the Church of England without episcopal ordination (which ended formally at the Restoration) and without mention being made of their receiving Confirmation at a bishop's hands, it seems likely until the Restoration at least that foreign Protestants who sojourned in or who immigrated to England simply became *de facto* members of their local parishes without receiving Confirmation.

Reception by a bishop of persons who had been baptized and confirmed in the Roman Catholic Church or who had been baptized and chrismated in an Orthodox Church rather than having these persons undergo Confirmation by an Anglican bishop. This provision came under criticism by some as being theologically incoherent, because Confirmation could be administered in the Roman Catholic Church not only by bishops but by episcopally-deputed presbyters; and because the Orthodox Churches had no rite of Confirmation. An amendment of the canons of The Episcopal Church in the 1980s provided that any baptized Christian (now including Protestants) who had either been confirmed or who had made some other adult profession of faith in another tradition could be received into membership rather than being confirmed by an Anglican bishop.[16] Some other Anglican Churches followed suit, and the ACNA's rite of Confirmation explicitly provides for this in a rubric in the service: "Those having made adult professions of faith in other Christian traditions are Received with the laying on of hands." This change in practice has served to restore a measure of theological coherence by emphasizing the previously-noted character of Confirmation as a believing ("adult") profession of faith. Importantly, the practice of requiring Reception *with the laying on of episcopal hands* also recognizes the character of Confirmation as a commissioning to the ministry of apostolic witness as it were in another part of the Lord's vineyard.

Finally, should Confirmation (or Reception) be in any sense required? As noted, it is theologically incoherent (and perhaps unfaithful to the discernment of the ecclesial Body of Christ) to require persons who by Baptism are fully members of the Body of Christ to be confirmed in order to receive Holy Communion. But what about voting membership in a parish? What about service in episcopally-licensed lay ministries (Lay Readers, Lay Preachers and Evangelists, Lay Eucharistic Ministers or Chalicists, etc.) or service as a vestry or parish council member? What about ordination?

Given that Confirmation can be understood in part as a commissioning to the ministry of apostolic witness, it is fitting to require it of those who undertake public ministry in the Church, whether that be licensed lay ministries, service as vestry or parish council members, or holy orders. As to Confirmation as a requirement for voting membership in a parish or mission, that is a question perhaps best left to be addressed by our bishops and their presbyters taking counsel together, perhaps with the insights of lay leaders on vestries and parish councils as well. There may be reasons here to distinguish baptized *communicant* (or communicating, i.e. receiving communion) membership from voting membership in a parish or mission. Only those who have made an adult (or a mature adolescent) profession of faith, have renewed their baptismal vows

[16] The Reformed Episcopal Church (founded in 1873), who have also historically received presbyters (ministers of Word and Sacrament or pastors) ordained in other traditions into ministry rather than requiring them to submit to episcopal ordination, anticipated this change in practice by about a century as reflected in a rubric in the 1963 (fifth) edition of their Book of Common Prayer that reads, "Members of other Churches, uniting with this Church, need not be confirmed, except at their own request." This rubric is absent from the current (2003) edition of the REC Prayer Book.

(or have made them for the first time in baptism as an adult), and have been confirmed by the bishop, would be voting members of the parish. Finally, while a mature profession of faith in Jesus Christ may take many forms (not least in the weekly reception of Holy Communion and in the corporate renewal of baptism vows that accompanies baptisms and at the Great Vigil of Easter), it is appropriate that parish clergy should encourage their baptized parishioners who have not already made a mature profession of faith to do so in Confirmation.