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# The Theological Implications of Confirmation

By ARTHUR C. REPP

EDITORIAL NOTE: This article which will appear in two installments represents a chapter of a book on Confirmation which is expected to be published in the near future.

THE Lutheran practice of confirmation can hardly be described as uniform during its long history. The differences varied greatly both in number and in kind as many accretions attached themselves to this practice. Because there was no Biblical basis for confirmation, the Lutheran Church did not hesitate to warrant new emphases and directions with changing circumstances and needs. As confirmation is practiced today, especially in the United States, it is cluttered with the remnants of such additions, the origins of which are rarely recognized. Just as the Reformation Church thought it was restoring confirmation in accord with the tradition of the early church, so many today regard their specific practice of confirmation as their heritage from the Reformation. This notion has given confirmation an aura which has largely prevented the consideration and acceptance of any major changes where necessary.

A study of confirmation as practiced within any given Lutheran congregation will likely reveal that many things are said and done which cannot be harmonized with the teachings of the Lutheran Church. Such differences have caused considerable confusion. They create some of the larger problems of which many pastors are aware and which have made an even larger number of laymen uneasy. It is therefore the

task of Lutherans in America, as it has been their task in Europe for some time, to restudy the practice of confirming baptized persons. Such a study should help eliminate accretions which do not meet present needs or which imply a contradiction of sound Lutheran doctrine. This will not be a simple task, because our confirmation tradition, though transplanted from Europe, has already become deeply rooted in the life of the church. Traditions are not easily disturbed, for as someone has put it, "it is easier to change a doctrine than a tradition."<sup>1</sup>

Yet if we are to get at the basis of some of the current problems in connection with confirmation, we must carefully evaluate our tradition and determine whether it is in harmony with Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions. If we are willing to make this study, we have already taken a long step toward a sound solution. If, on the other hand, we prefer first to tackle problems connected with the curriculum and methods or with a more effective administration, we shall continue to consume our efforts in attempting to eliminate mere surface symptoms. The heart of the confirmation problem is in the theological basis which must govern the objectives for confirmation.

Confirmation in the Lutheran Church is built on the means of grace. It is suspended

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<sup>1</sup> Berthold von Schenk, "Confirmation and First Communion," *Una Sancta* (Pentecost 1957), p. 3.

between the sacramental poles of Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Confirmation is part of the nurturing of that faith which the Holy Spirit has created in Holy Baptism. Through instruction the church discloses to the catechumen the meaning and the continued significance of this sacrament. Confirmation furthermore prepares the child for a joyful and reverent participation in the Lord's Supper and a richer sharing of all that which life in the body of Christ implies. Such nurture and preparation is performed through instruction by the Word, the power of life to life.

## I

### HOLY BAPTISM

#### *The Baptismal Covenant*

When the Christian Church in obedience to her Lord's command baptizes a child, she is privileged to perform a stupendous miracle in His name. In Holy Baptism God seizes the unwilling sinner and makes him His own. In this act the sin, together with the old man, dies an instant death. God creates in the infant the miracle of faith and gives him the new life. In Baptism the child is born anew and is clothed with the righteousness of Christ. God says, in effect, "You are My child, My own, through the merits of My Son."

Furthermore, in Baptism God makes a covenant with the infant. It is a unique covenant in every respect. It is unique not merely because the righteous and holy God makes an agreement with a sinner but because the agreement established is a covenant of *grace*. Covenants are usually bilateral, that is, one party agrees to something to which the second party makes a corresponding promise. Two partners,

as it were, each make an agreement. In the event that one breaks his promise, the covenant becomes null and void. If there are any damages to the innocent party, he may even have recourse to law. On the other hand, if it is agreeable to both parties, the covenant may be renewed. But not so with the baptismal covenant. It is unilateral. It is not conditioned by any act or promise of man. Natural man is impotent, yes, even unwilling to drive any kind of bargain with God or to establish a covenant. But in His mercy and love, God comes to man in his sin and with Baptism enters into a personal relationship. Therein He makes a promise of forgiveness, life, and salvation. Man merely accepts the promises and gifts of Baptism and thereby enters into the covenant relationship. Even this acceptance is the result of the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit.

The uniqueness of the baptismal covenant is heightened by the fact that it is continuous. God never breaks it. The covenant never ceases and needs no renewal. His promises are never withdrawn. "Our Baptism abides forever; and even though someone should fall from it and sin, nevertheless we always have access thereto, that we may again subdue the old man."<sup>2</sup>

True, man on his part can reject Baptism, he can refuse to believe, but this does not invalidate the covenant. Should he by the grace of God return to the covenant, he would not be renewing it. It was never made by him, nor can he break it, though he may lose his covenant relationship. When man returns, he places himself under God's covenant and again receives its precious benefits.

<sup>2</sup> The Large Catechism, Infant Baptism, par. 77.

Though Baptism has made man righteous in Christ, it is equally true that man is still sinful according to his own flesh. This creates the tension of the two natures of the Christian as summed up in Luther's well-known phrase *simul iustus et peccator*. The continuous combat of these two natures in the Christian is signified by Holy Baptism in the drowning of the old man and in the coming forth of the new man (Rom. 6:3-14). This significance of Baptism continues throughout life. Thus, while the sacrament is never repeated and the covenant cannot be renewed, its significance for the Christian is continuous. In that sense Baptism is not accomplished until death. The Small Catechism says of Baptism:

It signifies that the old Adam in us should, by daily contrition and repentance, be drowned and die with all sins and evil lusts and, again, a new man daily come forth and arise, who shall live before God in righteousness and purity forever.

Here the covenant idea is particularly helpful. In Baptism God renews us. There His Spirit has mortified our sinful nature and prepares us "for death and the resurrection in the Last Day." In addition, God gives us the desire for more and more of the new life, to remain in the covenant and to mortify sin more and more until the day we die. "God complies with this desire too, and disciplines you all your life with many good works and many kinds of suffering, whereby He fulfills what you have desired in Baptism."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther, "A Sermon on the Holy Most Venerable Sacrament of Baptism," WA 2, 730, 23; SL X, 2118, 13. Translation taken from Regin Preter, "Luther on Word and Sacrament" in *More About Luther* (Decorah, Iowa: Luther College Press, 1958), p. 93.

In commenting on this Preter said:

These sentences must be carefully considered. They tell us a great deal about Luther's conception of Baptism. The covenant concluded between God and you in Baptism is a personal relationship. Therefore you are not receiving something magical, with which you can purify yourself according to your own wishes and ideals and thus obtain a righteousness of your own. On the contrary! You are being put under an obligation toward another person, in this instance the obligation by taking the right attitude toward your God. You must ask and pray for that which God intends to work in you: to mortify your flesh and to make you a new creature in the resurrection with Christ. . . . In concluding His covenant with us, God on His part has also accepted the consequences of such an unequal partnership. What are they? Luther answers: "Because this is your covenant with God, God on His part looks with grace upon you and promises that He will not impute the sins which remain in your nature after Baptism. He will neither regard them nor condemn you because of them; rather He is satisfied and pleased with the fact that you are constantly trying and desiring to mortify them and to be rid of them in your death."<sup>4</sup>

In the light of this, how can we justify speaking of a renewal of the baptismal covenant in confirmation? If it is not referring to the covenant of grace, is it being confused with the vow of the sponsors to renounce the devil and all his ways? If so, then a different terminology is needed. The renewal of the baptismal covenant was introduced into confirmation by the Pietists and their forerunners. They were interested

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<sup>4</sup> Pp. 93 ff. The Luther citation is from WA 2, 731, 3; SL X 2118, 14.

in a pure congregation within the church, *ecclesiola in ecclesia*, and the renewal of the baptismal covenant was part of their conversion theology. Others, like Grossgebauer, believed that Baptism was incomplete and needed confirmation as a complement.<sup>5</sup> A renewal of the baptismal covenant tied the two together. Such ideas are Scripturally untenable and are unwarranted in a Lutheran confirmation.

At confirmation the young Christian gives merely his personal affirmation of the covenant which God made with him at the time of his Baptism and so reaffirms that he will live in it. This is part of his continuous concern. Until he dies he undertakes through Word and Sacrament to remain in the baptismal covenant and, in faith, to mortify his flesh. Such an affirmation is similar to the remembering of the covenant called for in several early Lutheran church orders before Pietism had effected a change in the confirmation practice.<sup>6</sup>

#### *Membership in the Church*

Since in Holy Baptism we have put on Christ (Gal. 3:27) and share in His death and resurrection (Rom. 6:3 f.), the

<sup>5</sup> Theophil Grossgebauer, *Wachterstimme aus dem verwuesteten Zion sampt einem treuen Unterricht von der Wiedergeburt* (Frankfurt a/M: J. Wildens, 1661), pp. 71 f.

<sup>6</sup> Braunschweig-Wolfenbuettel CO, 1569 (Emil Sehling, *Die Evangelischen Kirchenordnungen des XVI. Jahrhunderts*, VI, 1, 165); Mansfeld Agende, 1580 (Sehling, II, 234); Lauenburg CO, 1585 (Johann Michael Reu, *Quellen zur Geschichte des kirchlichen Unterrichts in der evangelischen Kirche Deutschlands zwischen 1530 und 1600*, Guetersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1904—35, I, 3, 1, 563); Saxony CO, 1580 (Sehling, I, 425); Wittenberg Reformation, 1545, asks the children whether they intend to remain in their baptismal covenant (Sehling, I, 211).

baptized person is a member of the body of Christ, His church (Eph. 4:3-6). Membership in this church is the only kind of membership spoken of in Scripture. Membership in a local congregation gets its meaning and validity in the sight of God only because it is derived from a membership in the holy Christian Church. Membership in the congregation is not a higher kind of membership, nor is it more real because we can see someone's signature on the books. The different types of membership which an organization may devise for the sake of order or for its own efficiency, such as baptized, communicant, and voting memberships, do not indicate third-, second-, and first-class members in the church of Christ, but are convenient tags to indicate various levels of rights or responsibilities which have been accepted by them. The term "full membership," used frequently at confirmation to indicate communicant membership, is a misnomer because it may imply that the privileges invested add something to or complete the membership given in Baptism. It is equally invalid when "full membership" is applied to voting membership, because it would, by the same token, imply that nonvoters have not as full a membership. If degree of responsibility is the criterion for "full membership," then not all the voters would be full members either. This would require the church to calibrate the scale of its membership even more precisely. God knows of no graduated scale for memberships. Baptism makes us members of the only church He knows, the body of Christ. (Rom. 12:4 f.)

When a child is baptized, it is baptized into a specific faith, usually expressed in some ancient baptismal confession, such as

the Apostles' Creed. Baptism is normally performed by a minister of Christ who has been called by a specific group of Christians assembled about the means of grace, who are the church in a given place. Even when a layman performs an emergency Baptism, he does this by virtue of his membership in the holy Christian Church. In such a case the child's newly created membership is normally inscribed in the records where Christians are assembled and recognize him as a fellow member. But such assembled Christians do not exist in a vacuum. They profess this membership in Christ through some confession of faith, more or less definitely defined, as they are assembled about the sustaining Word. They may call it Pilgrim Congregational, Christ Episcopal, St. Peter's Roman Catholic, the Lutheran Church of the Atonement, or by some other confessional name. Hence the baptized child's membership in the holy Christian Church is expressed and made more evident through the confession of the congregation which authorized or accepted his Baptism. By virtue of his Baptism a child becomes a member of the local congregation.

When a baptized child is led to believe that his membership in the Lutheran Church begins with his confirmation, a serious confusion is created. Even when in theory it is stated that while his membership began with Baptism, he is now making a public acknowledgment of that fact, we confuse the issue for him and the congregation in attendance. Why ask him at confirmation, "Do you desire to be a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and of this congregation?" when he has already been a member all these

years? To say that we are projecting him back to the time of his Baptism leads to a serious misunderstanding, as evidenced by the church's literature. To speak of membership in connection with a child's confirmation is not only confusing, it exalts a man-made rite and detracts from the initiatory sacrament which God has established.

#### *Confession of Faith*

At the time of Holy Baptism the sponsors confessed, in the child's stead, the faith which the Holy Spirit created by the water and the Word. The fact that the agenda may call for a confession of faith a moment before the actual sacrament is administered is immaterial. The entire rite is one act. We *know* that the Holy Spirit will work faith in the child. Whether we confess this faith before or after it is engendered is immaterial. More important than this is the fact that this confession of faith expresses the faith into which the church is embracing the child through his Baptism. Furthermore, the confession of faith of the sponsors is also made in the name and in the stead of the child. This confession is as valid as though the child made it himself. The acts of parents or appointed guardians in behalf of minors are always regarded as valid and binding. The child brought up in a Christian home soon learns to make a confession of faith with his own lips. At first it may be a simple "Abba, Father." As his understanding grows, his confession becomes a little more precise, consisting perhaps of the words of the Apostles' Creed. In fact, he makes many confessions of faith during his childhood. Every time he seeks forgiveness of sin he makes such confession. Every attendance at Sunday school or church is in a manner

of speaking a confession of faith. After he has been instructed, he is asked at confirmation to make a public confession through the examination and in the specific questions or the rite. A confession is further made at his first Communion, and by the grace of God he continues to confess throughout his life. The point is that the confession of faith at confirmation is only an episode in his life. It represents a stage in the development of his personal faith. It is in effect a progress report in the presence of the congregation and is an occasion for joy, thanksgiving, and prayer. Normally it is not a matter of "standing up and being counted," as some may wish to dramatize it. If in rare cases it happens to be that, then even in a more precise sense will this be true at his first Communion, wherein he identifies himself with the body of Christ and "shows forth the Lord's death."

Is this a confession of the faith to be believed, or is it a confession of the faith which the catechumen personally believes? This distinction has been discussed throughout the history of confirmation. It appears that the majority of Lutherans in the 16th century had a confession of the objective faith in mind, although this cannot be proved with certainty in every instance. In recent years Reu was one of the strongest proponents of this view. He feared that every effort to elicit a subjective confession was, or might become, an interference in the work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>7</sup> It is regrettable that his fears are often well founded. Nevertheless, because we know that a living, saving faith was created by Baptism

and normally was nurtured by the home and the church through the Word, we should assume that this faith is still alive and was further strengthened through the confirmation instruction. Such a faith is ready always to express itself when a witness is called for. We know that in some this faith may have died and the instruction may have been a formality under parental or social pressure. For this reason it becomes the responsibility of the pastor to show the confirmands the harm in making an insincere confession. Beyond that he cannot go. The final responsibility lies with the catechumen. Any effort to probe into his expressed faith to determine whether the catechumen is sincere is wholly unwarranted and highly dangerous. Even Paul did not suggest it to the Corinthians. In the final analysis, only the manifestly impenitent sinner may be turned away from confirmation.

#### *Surrender to Christ and Obedience to Him*

Baptism is not a passive sacrament. We do not merely become new creatures, put on Christ, and become members of His body. We are new creatures that we may walk in the newness of life; we have been cleansed that we may serve Christ "with fruit unto holiness"; we are members of His body to give ourselves to Christ and to His people. Baptism is an active sacrament implanting in us the dynamic of the Gospel. Through our sponsors we have been called upon to renounce the devil and all his works and to surrender ourselves to the obedience of Christ. Such a surrender we promise daily as the continued significance of our Baptism requires. This we do in a more formal way at confirmation or whenever the occasion demands it.

When we surrender ourselves to Christ

<sup>7</sup> J. M. Reu, *Catechetics or Theory and Practice of Religious Instruction*, 2d rev. ed. (Chicago: Wartburg Publishing House, 1927), pp. 278, 631.

and promise Him obedience, do we not by the same token promise obedience to His church of which He is the Head? Yes, to *that* church and *in those things* with which He has charged His church. It is not a *carte blanche*. When, therefore, the catechumen is asked in the confirmation rite to surrender himself to the "discipline of the church," the church is leaving itself open to serious question and becomes suspect. Such a requirement may be understood correctly. It may imply that the catechumen surrenders himself in obedience to the church only when it acts within its proper sphere and limits itself to the responsibilities specifically given to her by Christ. Viewing this, however, in the light of history, we know that such a demand can be seriously abused. When Christians get together in an organized way, they are easily tempted to make their predilections binding on others. When Bucer introduced the vow of obedience to the church, his purpose was to use confirmation as a device to impose stricter discipline.<sup>8</sup> As well intentioned as Bucer may have been, he thereby created new crops of popes where his formula was used. The same tendency is still prevalent when congregations attempt to legislate their members into a higher sanctification by binding consciences in matters wherein Christ has set them free.

#### *The Baptismal Vow*

The renunciation of the devil and all his works and the confession of faith of the sponsors are often referred to as the

baptismal vows. It appears that sometimes this vow is confused with the baptismal covenant. In such cases this immediately poses the question, Is the vow of the sponsors regarded as the promise of the "second party" in the baptismal covenant? Then the baptismal covenant would no longer be a covenant of grace. Then God's gifts become conditioned by man's action. Or is this a new covenant to be distinguished from God's covenant of grace but made in response to His covenant in Baptism? If so, who is the "other party" in this second covenant? God? What new promise is He making which He has not already made unilaterally and unconditionally in Baptism? What has more likely happened is that in practice the church has used the terms vow and covenant interchangeably. But this is incorrect. The vow of the sponsors in the child's stead is not a covenant. It is a promise made in response to the gracious work of God in the child.

At confirmation the child is asked frequently to repeat or renew this baptismal vow, often with an elaboration that comes to several questions. The elaboration is the result of various theological emphases in the Lutheran Church and sometimes includes accretions which go beyond the Scriptural requirements for the admission to first Communion.

How should the vow be interpreted? Is it considered binding for life? There are many who regard it as such and have given the vow the status of a solemn oath. But is this proper? Assuming that confirmation is not terminal and that Christian growth will continue through further instruction, is it not possible that the communicant will see implications in what he

<sup>8</sup> His views are reflected in the Ziegenhein Order of Church Discipline, 1538 (Ae. L. Richter, *Die evangelischen Kirchenordnungen des 16. Jahrhunderts*; Weimar: Landes-Industrie-comptoir, 1846), I, 291.



has confessed, or what he believed to have confessed, which he did not and could not have seen at the age of 12 to 16? If we can assume that it is possible for a conscientious Christian to accept in error, without destroying his saving faith, a view of the Christian doctrine that is Scripturally untenable but which he nevertheless sincerely believes, can we, dare we, bind his conscience and say that because of the vow he made at 14 he must now remain loyal to the Evangelical Lutheran Church? The problem becomes even more acute when the vow is interpreted to mean a specific synodical body within the Lutheran Church, where the theological differences between synods, as important as they may be, are difficult for the uninitiated to understand. Under such circumstances, would a Christian whom we wish to bind with a lifetime vow be held to the Lutheran Church by the Law or by the drawing power of the Gospel? If he remains with the Lutheran Church merely because of his vow, can he serve it in good conscience, fervently and loyally?

Is it necessary that we attempt to hold any person on the basis of a man-made vow, a vow which may have been made under some pressure, parental or otherwise? Would it not serve the purpose better if the vow were interpreted to mean that it is the catechumen's sincere intent on the basis of an understanding at his level of maturity? To this end he promises, directly or by implication, to remain under the means of grace which alone can keep him in this faith. Thus both the church and the catechumen would place their trust in the power of the Word and in the work of the Spirit rather than in the promise of a person.

### *Instruction in the Word*

A child is brought to Baptism in response to Christ's command to make disciples by baptizing. The church and the parents are at the same time aware that in this injunction of the Lord they are bidden to teach children "to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you." With Holy Baptism, therefore, both the home and the church assume the duty to teach the baptized child. For this reason sponsors make the promise that they will hold themselves responsible that this obligation is met by the parents, and if not, that they themselves will assume it. Parents, in effect, say at the Baptism of their child, "We will try to bring up this child as a Christian in the faith here expressed and pledge ourselves to this purpose by our instruction and through our Christian example." The church in turn promises to assist the parent because it recognizes that it shares in this responsibility.

Such teaching the Scriptures call the nurture in the Lord. It is not terminal. It does not end at a given point within the life of the Christian or with a single rite. Nurture is growth; it is evidence of life. Christian education is, therefore, a lifelong process for the child, the youth, and the adult (1 John 2:13). But the church has not always been faithful to such a responsibility. Unfortunately, it has traditionally reserved its major emphasis for the period prior to the child's confirmation. This has placed the church in a dilemma. Since the church has permitted confirmation to become the fixed terminus of formal instruction for the majority of members, it has attempted to gain additional time for its task by postponing confirmation as long as possible, often regret-

ting that it cannot postpone it even longer. But with such a postponement the church has at the same time postponed the child's first Communion and with it has deprived him for several years of the spiritual power and assurance which the Lord intended for His own.

Instead of postponing confirmation as long as possible, the church needs to recover the Reformation principles that Christian instruction must extend beyond the time of the Christian's first Communion. Confirmation must not be re-

garded as a sort of temple curtain beyond which the church cannot guide and direct the young Christian in his religious instruction. In fact, as with the significance of Baptism, Christian nurture ends only when the sinner-saint is transformed into a saint of the Church Triumphant. In such a continuing instruction the church assists the Christian in making his life a *coming into* his Baptism, helping him constantly to appropriate the gifts received in the sacrament.

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