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The Influence of the Reformed Tradition on
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LOWELL H. ZUCK

The Theological Implications of Confirmation

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The Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation
in the Theology of Karl Barth

ROBERT D. PREUSS

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The Theological Implications of Confirmation

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II

THE LORD'S SUPPER

SINCE the Christian's whole life is a continuous spiritual Baptism, what is the relationship of the Word and the Lord's Supper to Baptism? Are they subordinate to it? Not at all. As Regin Prenter points out, it is just because the baptismal covenant, God's promise of man's salvation and man's faith in God's promise, implies the necessity of a lifelong exercise of man's faith in that covenant that there is a need

for a continuous sanctifying activity of the living Word, not in competition with, but in consequence of the regenerating activity of the living Word in Baptism. In this sanctifying activity preaching, absolution, and above all the Lord's Supper assume necessary functions.⁹

The Lord's Supper is an indispensable help in the lifelong struggle of the sinner-saint.

The preparation for the Lord's Supper has been historically one of the major goals of confirmation, and as such this sacrament is the second sacramental pole. Confirmation is to help meet the responsibility both of the parents and of the church for the instruction which is implied in Baptism and the preparation for the Lord's Supper as required by 1 Cor. 11: 23-30. Confirmation does not, however, satisfy once and for all the instructional implications of either sacrament. The in-

structional obligations implied in Baptism are lifelong; the preparation for the first Communion is not essentially different from the preparation which must precede every participation in the Lord's Supper.

To say that the Lord's Supper has been associated with confirmation throughout its historical development is not to overlook the array of extraneous acts which have at one time or another been connected with confirmation and which have, on occasion, relegated the preparation for the second sacrament into a somewhat subordinate position. Members of the Erlangen school and others since then have tried to dissociate confirmation and the Lord's Supper altogether.¹⁰ If, however, the church is to be faithful to its historic tradition, then the Lord's Supper must with Baptism retain a prominent position. If the church finds it necessary to add a second purpose to confirmation instruction, such as making it a terminal educational agency, then this addition must not be used to govern and determine the objectives for confirmation.

What are the Scriptural requirements

⁹ "Luther on Word and Sacrament" in *More About Luther*, p. 100.

¹⁰ These were especially Johann Wm. Fr. Hoefling, *Das Sakrament der Taufe*, II (Erlangen: Palm'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1848); Johann Chr. K. von Hofmann (*Encyclopaedie der Theologie*); Theodosius Harnack, *Die freie lutherische Volkskirche* (Braunschweig: Hellmuth Wollermann, 1902); Carl A. Gerhard v. Zezschwitz, *System der christlich-kirchlichen Katechetik*, I (Leipzig: Doerffling und Francke, 1863).

for a worthy participation in the celebration of the Lord's Supper? If we can dissociate ourselves from the traditions of our own practices, whatever they may be, and allow ourselves to be guided solely by the Scriptures, we see that the requirements for a worthy eating and drinking are quite modest. The first requirement is that the communicant is to be able to distinguish between the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper and the bread and wine of an ordinary meal, that is, he must recognize the real presence of the body and blood of our Lord in the sacrament. Secondly, the communicant must know and accept in faith the purpose for which the sacrament has been instituted. This implies more than a mere understanding of the Christian doctrine, especially the sacrament. The very purpose of the Lord's Supper requires that the communicant should recognize his sinfulness, for this was "the first cause" behind God's gracious act, and that he should repent of his sin and cling to the promises and merits of Christ for his forgiveness. Such faith will enable him to disown any other hope for forgiveness and salvation and to trust in Christ alone. Such faith will, furthermore, create the earnest resolve to amend his sinful life and "the fervent love toward one another."

Hear Luther as he summarizes what a worthy participation requires. In the Small Catechism he says,

Who is it, then, that receives this sacrament worthily? Fasting and bodily preparation are indeed a good external discipline; but he is truly worthy and well prepared who believes these words: *Given and shed for you, for the remission of sins*. But he who does not believe these words, or who doubts, is unworthy and unfit; for

the words *for you* require truly believing hearts.^{11a}

Elsewhere Luther said, "They are made worthy and pure only if they believe and hope that they will obtain grace. This faith alone makes them pure and worthy."^{11b} This is all that a faithful, i.e., a worthy, participation in the Holy Communion requires. Cannot this requirement be readily met by a 10- or 12-year-old Christian if the church and home live up to their baptismal obligation?

How has the church, however, interpreted worthy participation in actual practice? In speaking of the faith necessary for the Lord's Supper the church has frequently interpreted this to mean a specific state of faith or a specific amount of faith as evidenced by knowledge and understanding, something which can be measured and determined in a catechetical examination. In other words, understanding of the doctrine has been substituted for participation in faith.

To be sure, even when the church is prepared to settle for faith rather than a degree of knowledge, it still faces a dilemma because faith rests on a knowledge of God's saving act. We must still answer the question: How much knowledge is necessary? While the Reformation practice set the standard at a minimum, namely, a knowledge of the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the baptismal command, and the words of institution which a 10-year-old could grasp, the Lutheran Church has since then, without any

^{11a} The translation is taken from *The Book of Concord*, ed. H. E. Jacobs, Vol. I (Philadelphia: G. W. Frederick, 1882), p. 374.

^{11b} "Lectures on Hebrews," WA 58, 170, 13. Translation taken from Prenter, p. 101.

Scriptural authority, attempted gradually to raise the standard as high as possible, with an eye to advancing confirmation even to a still later age and to require even more of the catechumen. It has done this not because it believed that our Lord actually laid down such a rigid requirement for a worthy participation but because it associated with the goal of confirmation such extraneous aims as conversion, church membership, or Christian education, and has allowed these to determine the standards for first Communion.¹²

¹² The usual age of the catechumen who partook of his first Communion was quite early as compared with present-day practice. As a matter of fact, age was not regarded the criterion but rather the catechumen's readiness to partake of the sacrament. Almost invariably the church orders drawn up before 1585 used expressions such as when "the children have come of age" or the "perfecta aetas." The Roman Catholic Church interpreted the "age of discretion" in various ways, usually between 7 and 12. According to German Law the "perfecta aetas" was 12.

Where there is a reference to age in the early Lutheran church orders, it was rarely higher than 12. Thus Hohenlohe, 1577 (Richter, II, 401) and Onoltzbach in Ansbach (Preface to Georg Karg's catechism in Reu, *Quellen*, I, 1, 580) have 12. Also Allstedt, 1533 (Schling, I, 511) and Pomerania, 1571 (Matrikel fuer Lindow in Sehling, IV, 517). The former indicated that persons over 12 were subject to a personal tax, while the latter required that such persons should contribute to the support of the pastor. In both instances the age was set at 12 because persons were normally communicants by that time. Lower Austria, 1571, set a range between 10 and 15 (Theo. Kliefoth, *Liturgische Abhandlungen*, III, 1, 102). Braunschweig, 1542, suggested that the former custom of 10 or 11 be retained (Schling, VI, 2, 841). The Church Order of Sweden, drawn up by Laurentius Petri in 1571, stated that no child younger than nine years, or eight at the least, should attend the Lord's Supper. "For children younger than that have too little understanding about the sacrament." Oscar Quensel, *Bidrag till svenska liturgiens his-*

An earlier partaking of the Lord's Supper than is customary at present seems to be warranted by the religious climate in which we live. Recognizing that the Lord's Supper is a means of grace established by God for the sole purpose of building up His church and for helping the individual remain within His baptismal covenant, the church should be very loath to allow a baptized child to wait until he is 14 or 15 before he gets this help and protection offered by Christ. In the days of the Reformation the church faced many problems that are current today. A little reading in the writings of Luther, in the reports of the church visitations, and in the introductions attached to the church orders will dispel all romanticism about the world at that time. The Reformation Church did not develop in a Christian society. For such an age 16th-century Lutherans pressed the cup of forgiveness to the lips of the children at a very tender age.

Yet in one respect the climate is different today from that of the 16th century. It is an important difference. In that day

toria, II (Upsala: Akademiska Boktryckeriet, 1890), p. 88. During this century children in Denmark, where Bugenhagen had drawn up the church order, were often admitted to Communion when they were only six to seven years of age. E. Belfour, "The History of the Liturgy of the Lutheran Church in Denmark," *Memoirs of the Lutheran Liturgical Association*, II (Pittsburgh: Lutheran Liturgical Association, 1907), 68 ff. In his agenda of 1844, which he dedicated to Fr. K. D. Wyneken, Wilhelm Loehe wrote: "Admission to the examination should not be determined by a specific age. In fact, few will be mature enough before 10 or 11. One should therefore keep in mind children of this age and older. But this should not eliminate a younger child whom the pastor or parents regard as sufficiently mature so that he is not turned back simply because of his age. . . . Not age but the ability required by 1 Cor. 11:28 to examine oneself is to be decisive in every case."

the enemy did not deny that the Scriptures were the Word of God, that man was accountable to God, that all things were under the rule of God. All this was self-evident even to the coarsest worldling, except that he did not follow through with it in life. This is not the case today. True, the climate in the United States cannot be said to be antireligious, but this is only because man is not concerned enough with religion even to oppose it. Man is so wrapped up in himself and in his activities that God has been ruled out of his conscious thought. Even when he is not absorbed in making a living, his growing amount of leisure time is appropriated by the entertainment and amusement industry. Meanwhile the youth of the land is guided by schools that are largely committed to a scientific secularism that has substituted scientific laws for God, scientific precision for holiness, scientific objectivity for faith, and scientific amorality for the will of God. It would seem that the church which must compete with such naked materialism would use every means of grace at its disposal to safeguard its youth and use as early as possible the Lord's Supper as another avenue in which God confirms the individual's spiritual life.

The Lord's Supper a Church Sacrament

While the Lord's Supper is a highly personal sacrament because in it God's gifts are given to the individual in a very direct way and the words "for you" require him to believe, yet the Lord's Supper is a corporate sacrament in a sense not true of the Word and Baptism. The church preaches the Word to all; the church administers Baptism to all concerning whom it has some assurance that Christian instruction

will follow. In the adults the Word has preceded Baptism, and Baptism confirms the faith created by the Word. The Lord's Supper is unique in that the church administers it only to the church.

In giving the individual Christian the sacrament the church, as Christ's agent, offers the gift of fellowship not only with the Lord Himself but also with all the saints. This bond of union, which has existed since Baptism, is strengthened by Holy Communion. Hence Luther says of the sacrament of fellowship:

Therefore look to it that you also surrender yourself to every man to have everything in common with him, so that you never isolate yourself from anybody in hate or anger. For this sacrament of fellowship, love, and unity does not permit conflict and disunity. You must take the misery and need of others into your heart as if they were yours, and you must offer others your portion as if it were theirs, exactly as Christ has done to you in the sacrament—that is, by love be transformed into one another, out of many particles be made one bread and wine.¹³

Because the Lord's Supper is a corporate sacrament, the congregation is concerned about the spiritual maturity of every participant, especially at his first Communion. This is in harmony with the Augsburg Confession, which says, "It is not customary to give the body of the Lord, except to them that have been previously examined and absolved" (XXV, 1). Sharing in the fellowship of the Lord's Supper is not simply an individual matter to be decided by

¹³ "Sermon on the Most Venerable Sacrament of the Holy True Body of Christ and on the Brotherhoods, 1519," WA 2, 750, 27; SL XIX 439. Translation taken from Prenter, pp. 110 f.

the Christian alone, or by the pastor or parent with the catechumen, but under God by the congregation. For this reason, even where confirmation had as yet not been instituted in the Reformation Church and where the catechumens were examined privately or together with communicants who had come to confession, the pastor later announced to the congregation that such catechumens had come to confession and asked the congregation to intercede in their behalf. As confirmation was later established, either as a private or a public ceremony, public prayers were always offered in behalf of the confirmand by the congregation.

If the participation had been considered merely a private matter, the catechumen or the parent could have determined when the child was ready for his first Communion without any reference to the congregation or its appointed representatives. This was never the practice in the Lutheran Church. Instead, the church set up the regulations which it deemed necessary for deciding when and under what circumstances persons might participate in the Lord's Supper. The fact that the church has not been scrupulously careful in requiring neither more nor less than was Scripturally warranted has not deprived her of this responsibility.

In trying to meet her responsibility the church immediately faces some practical problems. In a large congregation it is obviously impossible to consider each catechumen separately to determine exactly when he is prepared. When the background of the children and their homes vary greatly, especially where an intensive mission program has been under way for some time, it will be extremely difficult to make decisions without a broad governing

policy. Such a policy must be kept broad if the administration of it is not to become legalistic. If, for instance, it sets up the minimum age level at 11 or 12, some flexibility must still be retained if it is to be administered according to Scriptural principles. Granted that this may still prove arbitrary in isolated instances because it may unnecessarily postpone some child's first Communion, such a policy can generally be administered in an evangelical manner.

All this is not to say that the admission to the first Communion is essentially different from any subsequent participation. What happens at confirmation is nothing else than what is expected of every communicant. To be sure, at confirmation the preparation for the first Communion takes on a structure that is different, but this is due only to the rite. In addition there is a special pastoral concern which will not be present later. But these are accidental to the preparation. Every successive preparation for the Lord's Supper will be a repetition of confirmation in miniature.

It is a misunderstanding to regard the extension of the privilege of participation in the Lord's Supper at confirmation, often affirmed with a handclasp, as a lifetime guarantee. Confirmation merely indicates that the confirmand has shown that he is able to discern the Lord's body and, as far as the congregation can determine, is spiritually fit to receive the gift of the Lord's Supper. At every subsequent participation the Christian must go through the same steps, not structured, of course, as in confirmation, as he prepares himself for a worthy participation in the Holy Communion. Hence the term communicant membership does not imply a special kind of membership, as though the Christian

were a card-carrying member of the church, or in this case a certificate-carrying member, but it means simply that he has at one time shown that he can properly prepare himself for a worthy participation in the sacrament.

Time for First Communion

It is interesting to note how with the development of confirmation the occasion when the catechumen receives his first Communion has assumed a secondary position. Originally when the catechetical practice was almost universal in the Lutheran Church, participation in the Lord's Supper was of prime importance. As the rite developed and was given liturgical form, the option was given to separate the rite from the Lord's Supper. As the rite became more elaborate, the use of the option became the normal practice, though confirmation itself was usually observed at a secondary service. As time went on, the examination was given such prominence that two services were no longer sufficient and a third was added. Under such circumstances the Lord's Supper became even more detached from confirmation, and in the popular mind it became somewhat anticlimactic, with major importance given to the rite of confirmation. The next step has already been suggested in the reform movement, namely, that there be a complete separation of confirmation and the Lord's Supper not only in time but in purpose. Small wonder that with this exaggeration of a human ceremony some have suggested that confirmation be abolished altogether and that no further contempt be shown the sacrament.

Instead of the three services presently observed, the church should attempt to combine the Lord's Supper and confirma-

tion into one service. If tradition is so strong that an extensive examination is required not merely to make a confession of faith but to show the congregation what point the catechumens have reached in their Christian understanding, then two services may be necessary, one for the examination at some secondary service and one for confirmation and the Lord's Supper. This practice should serve to remind the catechumen and the congregation that confirmation belongs with the Lord's Supper and loses much of its meaning by itself. It will also help to de-emphasize confirmation and focus attention on the sacrament as the precious gift of the Lord to His church.

How Essential Is Confirmation?

This is more than an academic question. It is asked to help point up what is essential and what is not. The German agenda of the Missouri Synod stated that before the catechumen is permitted to attend the Lord's Supper, he *must* give assent to his baptismal covenant and solemnly renew it before God. The implication was that this must be done publicly as at confirmation. What was meant by the "must"? The Wisconsin agenda (1909), which followed the Missouri agenda quite closely, was more discreet and stated that "they ought" to do this. Granted that only a baptized Christian can partake of the Lord's Supper and that the church will, as far as is possible, permit only the worthy participant to attend, the question still remains, Need there be a public confession of faith, or what is more, need there be a public ceremony such as confirmation before one can be admitted to the Lord's Supper? Obviously not. The church has always regarded confirmation as a human institution and has

permitted persons to receive their first Communion without confirmation in cases of emergency. In fact, persons who are baptized as adults are not confirmed and are normally admitted immediately to the sacrament.¹⁴

There are those who wish to utilize this option of admitting children to the Lord's Supper without confirmation by establishing a new rite for first Communion and reserving the name confirmation and its strong tradition for a later age, similar to the several proposals of the Erlangen school. This would give an entirely new meaning to confirmation. Such a drastic reform would not be new for the Lutheran Church. It did this with the Roman Catholic confirmation, utilizing the name and its tradition, though under severe handicap, and transferred them to a new evangelical rite. It is doubtful whether present circumstances warrant such a transplanting of purpose. It would appear more suitable to retain confirmation for what it always has been in the Lutheran Church, preparation for the Lord's Supper, and to formulate a new rite, if necessary, for a later period. This rite would serve either as a terminal date for the church's formal instruction or, where properly formulated, become an initiatory rite for voting membership. The latter may have some justification; the former would still not relieve the church of its obligation of lifelong instruction, for which there can be no formal rite beyond the burial service.

¹⁴ The 1949 agenda of the Synodical Conference unfortunately appears to allow the option of baptizing and confirming adults in the same service. Such a practice gives the confirmation rite an importance over against Baptism that is Scripturally unwarranted.

What, Then, Is Confirmation?

Obviously, confirmation is not a divine ordinance; it is not a sacrament. This has to be said not because anyone in the Lutheran Church has taught it to be such but because the aura about confirmation and the esteem with which it is held make it practically "untouchable." Neither does the importance of confirmation lie in the rite. During the major portion of the Lutheran Church's history confirmation was not universally observed with a ceremony. The heart of confirmation, however, lies in the instruction in the Word which precedes the rite. Here the real confirmation takes place, the confirmation of the faith by the Word. Here God continues to confirm the faith begun in Baptism and nurtured by the home and the church. When pastors use the confirmation instruction for children who have not been baptized or who have not previously been instructed, they are utilizing the practice in a way not originally intended. They must, therefore, make the necessary modifications to meet this special need. But basically the period of instruction is a confirming period. Claus Harms has correctly said, "He who is not confirmed before he is confirmed, will hardly be confirmed when he is confirmed."¹⁵ The word "confirm" may be used for any other activity in connection with confirmation only in a derived or figurative sense.

The instruction in the Word must not be confused with an information class. Since so much of education is informational, there is a tendency to regard confirmation as an instruction in which we merely inform people about God. This is

¹⁵ *Der Lutheraner*, VII (April 15, 1851), 136.

undoubtedly one of the major hazards of Christian education. Confirmation classes for adults are sometimes referred to as "information classes," to make them more appealing to the unchurched, who are invited to hear *about* the Christian religion without any personal commitment. Later when they have learned enough facts and presumably believe them, they can decide whether they want to join the church. This may have the elements of good salesmanship, but the consequences are often appalling. It is so easy for people to equate an understanding about God and His redemption with faith, forgetting that understanding is only the scaffold for faith. In confirmation instruction the Word is not simply to be transmitted, understood, discussed, and presented for tests; it is given primarily that it might be believed. The Word has within itself the power to effect just that. It can and does create, nurture, and sustain faith, and it should not be taught merely to help a person gather facts on religion. The instructor will therefore strive, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to guide and direct the young Christian, at his level of maturity, to a living, witnessing faith.

Confirmation helps the home and the church to focalize for the child what an important gift God has given him in Baptism and what further gifts await him in the Lord's Supper. The child is made more keenly aware of the concern which his parents and his fellow Christians have for his spiritual welfare. The ceremony further gives the catechumen the opportunity to make a personal, formal confession of faith, not in the sense that this is either the first or the last time that he will acknowledge his baptismal covenant, but rather as the

beginning of a series of witnesses he will make every time he partakes of the Lord's Supper.

For the congregation confirmation is a public witnessing of such a confession and a solemn reminder of their personal responsibility for these young Christians and for every other member of the body of Christ. It further reminds them of the gifts God shares with them in His means of grace. It gives them an opportunity to examine themselves whether the significance of their Baptism is daily manifest in their lives, whether they are still using the Word for its sustaining power, and whether theirs is the earnest desire to partake worthily of the Lord's Supper.

Because the congregation has a personal interest in the spiritual welfare of the confirmands, they intercede for them in prayer and petition God to impart the gifts of His Holy Spirit. The pastor personalizes the prayers of the congregation with the laying on of hands, symbolizing thereby whence all the sustaining help comes, giving them the assurance that the prayer of a righteous man availeth much. Some have contended that the laying on of hands should be eliminated because the act can easily be misunderstood. Kliefoth feels that even though theologians generally avoid a sacramental view, the average person still feels that in a rite so solemnly observed by the pastor "something" must have taken place.¹⁶ Perhaps a more frequent use of this ancient practice would dispel this notion where it exists. It would appear that this ancient custom should not be lightly given up as long as there is no serious misunderstanding in connection with its use.

¹⁶ Kliefoth, III, 1, 152.

What are the essential elements of confirmation? From all that has been said, it appears that there are but three such elements, the instruction in the Word, the confession of faith, and the intercession of the congregation, accompanied by the laying on of hands. The disturbing elements which are still attached to confirmation and which have led to serious misunderstandings are the renewal of the baptismal covenant, the reception into church membership, and the vows where they are meant as a lifelong promise. To these may be added the handclasp either when it is used to exalt and dramatize the vow or when it is extended as a sort of guarantee from the church of the privileges of communicant membership.

As confirmation is presently observed,

often with dramatic effects, there is a strong tendency to exaggerate its importance. The Christian's Baptism and his first attendance at Holy Communion are rarely regarded as high points in his life, though confirmation always is. Every overemphasis of confirmation is made at the expense of God's means of grace. Instruction in the Word becomes terminal, Baptism appears to need some completing act or must still be confirmed, and preparation for a worthy participation of the Lord's Supper becomes an intellectual exercise. When confirmation, however, is given its proper and more humble place, it becomes an edifying practice leading the young Christian closer to his Savior and to his church through a reverent and joyful use of the means of grace.

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