

Towards a New Theology of Confirmation

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Confirmation is more than a simple first reaffirmation of baptismal vows. In confirmation one assumes responsibility for carrying out what one committed oneself to do at baptism—serve God with one’s whole heart, mind, and soul. Like the eucharist, confirmation is a distinctive rite of strengthening and nurture, to sustain us in the difficult task of leading the Christoform life to which our baptism has called us. The Spirit is invoked here, not so much to make us God’s own as in baptism, but to empower us for living out our baptismal vows. United with Christ through the Spirit at baptism, we are turned from lives of sin back to the Father; empowered by the Spirit of Christ we go forth as Christ does to serve the Father’s mission of love in the world.

Recent developments in the life of the church suggest a need to revisit the theology of confirmation. The canonical questions about whether or not confirmation should be a condition for certain ministries and elected positions in the church are one such development. The answer to such questions hinges, one might presume, on clarifying what confirmation is all about. Prompting further reflection too are recent developments that tend to downplay the importance of confirmation. Confirmation, for example, is no longer a prerequisite for taking communion. And baptism might very well seem to have been elevated in significance, following the 1979 Prayer Book revisions, at confirmation’s expense. If baptism is full and complete initiation into the body of Christ, what is now the point of confirmation? Along with ECUSA’s new baptismal ecclesiology comes the loss, one might argue, of confirmation’s *raison d’être*. The new baptismal rites of the 1979 Prayer Book indeed incorporate so many of confirmation’s traditional

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elements—a sealing with chrism, laying on of hands when a bishop is present, emphatic invocation of the Spirit, a baptismal covenant suggestive of a mature Christian commitment—that confirmation threatens to collapse into it. At most confirmation simply seems to look back to baptism in reaffirmation, the first among many other such occasions of reaffirmation of baptismal vows in the church's worship life. What more might conceivably be left to confirmation as its distinctive contribution? Why even retain the rite, if confirmation is nothing more than a formal first baptismal reaffirmation?

My task is to shore up the present rite of confirmation—and indeed help reinvigorate it—by sketching a theological rationale that avoids making confirmation a simple reaffirmation of baptismal vows. There is much more to confirmation than baptism. And this can be shown without in any way jeopardizing baptism's standing as full and complete initiation into the body of Christ, as that is so properly emphasized in the 1979 Prayer Book.

What is Confirmation's Distinctive Contribution?

One way to clarify its contribution is to talk about confirmation's relationship to baptism in terms of a shift from actuality to manifestation or epiphany. What is already made real for us at baptism—our becoming one with Christ (Christ's own) and therefore set upon a new way of living—begins to be manifested as our own activity for a whole new way of life at confirmation. Everything has already happened in baptism but has yet to be revealed in our lives, made our own, personally appropriated, turned into a happening that our own lives display, until the decisive shift in our lives that confirmation establishes and marks.

Such a shift from actuality to manifestation is a better way of making sense of the contribution confirmation makes to baptism than a shift from potentiality to actuality (which suggests baptism remains incomplete without confirmation). The shift is more like a shift from an objective happening that alters our whole situation (we are now Christ's own) to our subjective response to, our coming to grips with, that changed circumstance, in correspondence to it. What has happened to and for us, despite our own sinful lives and beyond our created capacities and in that sense not simply to us but apart from us at baptism, is now brought to light in our lives, in the form of a whole way of living for which we take some responsibility. In confirmation

we very intentionally seek to glorify God in and through the character of our lives by allowing what God has done for us in Christ to shine through or light them up, in a distinctive way that reflects a personal sense of calling.

A distinction I make in my book *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity*, to talk about the Incarnation and its consequences, might be helpful here.¹ In Christ, humanity becomes the Word's own—that is what Incarnation means—for the purpose of making the powers of the Word humanity's own and thereby transforming, healing and deifying, it. In much the same way, we are made Christ's own in virtue of our baptism (parallel to the Incarnation in which humanity is made the Word's own). And then in confirmation, Christ becomes our own, as a visibly manifest transformative force determining the character of our whole lives (parallel to the way Jesus' humanity is elevated to a new form—literally raised from the dead—as a consequence of Incarnation).

But perhaps this way of making the distinctive contribution of confirmation clear can be improved upon. Baptism, after all—especially given the 1979 Prayer Book revisions—already includes elements of subjective manifestation and appropriation. Baptism is ideally an intentional commitment (for adults) that indicates, at least at the level of affirmation, the shape of a transformed way of life by way of the 1979 Prayer Book's more fully developed baptismal covenant.

A better way of making the point about confirmation's distinctive contribution would stress the mission side of baptism, the future-looking import of baptism, and discuss confirmation in terms of what baptism is thereby pointing to. On this way of looking at their relationship, confirmation would not simply look back at what was achieved in one's baptism but ahead to what baptism is for: the living of a Christoform life in witness and service to the world. In baptism one is committing oneself to assume or take on a task, prospectively; one is putting oneself in Christ's hands, showing oneself willing to go where Christ will lead. In confirmation, one begins to live these commitments out, to enter into the struggle to fulfill one's commitments, with some definite sense of direction, with some definite sense of where Christ is leading one.

¹ Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2001), chapter one.

In the case of those baptized as children, such a step might well correspond to rites of passage that signal maturity in an ordinary sense. One needs to be a grown-up to make the sort of intentional start on a Christoform way of life that confirmation represents. But being mature when one is baptized does not obviate the need to become mature in a Christian sense; everyone—whether an adult or a child when baptized—has the need to grow into what confirmation represents. The idea that only those baptized as children need to be confirmed depends upon a fundamentally non-Christian understanding of what it means to be a child, and then an adult. Whether one is an adult (in the ordinary sense or not) one is made (and remains) a child in Christ at one's baptism—born again, undergoing a new birth. All are made the children of God at baptism—which fundamentally indicates their utter dependence on God's act in Christ for their new status, and that (however long they have lived to this point) they are starting their lives all over again in a Christoform direction. Everyone needs to become an adult, then, or start on the path of maturity, in a Christian sense at confirmation—it is something to come (and finally eschatological), even for those baptized as adults.

Simply stated, in confirmation one shows oneself ready to do what one has promised to do in baptism. Confirmation becomes a kind of public rite of accountability, in which one assumes responsibility for now carrying out, in a particular direction appropriate to one's specific character and gifts, what one has committed oneself to doing at baptism—to serve God with one's whole heart, mind, and soul. Confirmation is the public resolve to now begin to be what one has promised to be. One might say confirmation is something like the phone call back to the doctor that confirms one's appointment for the next day. The doctor's assistant calls you to get you to confirm the appointment in that way. In complying, one is not simply reminded, reminding oneself, of what one had earlier promised to do. Calling back is a sort of public avowal, strengthening one's resolve to follow through on a commitment made earlier.

Confirmation on this way of looking at it might be associated with commissioning rites for Christian service. The decided stress here, however, would not be on special or particular acts of witness and discipleship, but on one's whole life as one of Christian service. This is no longer an optional matter, moreover, but what is required of every Christian, in virtue of his or her baptism.

It is true that we enter onto the path of a Christoform life, in varying degrees of explicit commitment, at baptism. But a separate rite

strengthening and nourishing us on this path makes sense, in the same way that the eucharist makes sense as a way of strengthening and nourishing our ties to Christ, established at baptism, by allowing us to feed on him continually. The two sides of baptism—(a) uniting us with Christ, making us Christ's own, (b) for a transformed life of witness and service to the world—are therefore appropriately reflected in two different sacramental rites strengthening and thus “confirming” what has gone before: eucharist and confirmation, respectively.

Eucharist and confirmation, both rites consequent to baptism, reflect and are a response to the trials and tribulations besetting the effort to be a Christian and live a Christian life. We require rites that strengthen and confirm us on the path to which Christ effectively calls us in baptism, because of our weakness and frailty. We learn about the risks of failure only when we begin to take on something; in confirmation we come to ask for the help of God, then, out of need. Calling out for divine aid, we are confirmed to combat, by the Holy Spirit, against our own temptations to do otherwise.

Having confirmation be a distinct sacramental rite (not simply one among other reaffirmations of one's baptismal vows) is important in order to make clear what might otherwise not be apparent: what is happening here is not simply our achievement—our growth in faith, our mature commitment—on the basis of baptismal gifts already bestowed, but something that itself requires the efficacious working of God's Spirit. We must be empowered by the Spirit for this maturation in the faith, for this living out of our baptismal vows. Insofar as it is a sacramental rite, confirmation reminds us that, here as elsewhere, our acts are never simply ours independently of God's acts for us. We must seek comfort and succor from the Spirit in the difficult effort to be what baptism has already made us.

An unrepeatable sacramental rite of confirmation (in contrast to a repeated eucharistic rite or repeated reaffirmations of baptismal vows) has the same sort of spiritual force as the unrepeatability of baptism: it renders concrete the irrevocable faithfulness of God's decision in Christ to be for us. Nothing can take away from our baptism, which makes us Christ's own forever. Nothing can take away from our confirmation, which renders steadfast for us God's loving intent to come to our aid in all the difficulties we face in the effort to lead a Christian life. The rite does not bear repeating; its once-and-for-all quality is just what allows us to trust utterly in God's promise to act on our behalf even as we continue to falter. In the struggle to lead a holy life of service to God's mission for the world, our confidence can

remain with God, and need not depend on the obvious goodness of our works or the ease of our growth in them.

Without taking away at all from the gifts of the Spirit at baptism, there is a need for this strengthening and confirming power of the Spirit in the undertaking of Christian witness and service. The Spirit works in different ways in the two cases; the Spirit works in a variety of ways and that variety helps make sense, more particularly, of the distinction between baptism and confirmation as sacramental rites that both invoke the Spirit.

The Spirit is the one who binds us to Christ just as the Spirit joins Father and Son by bonds of affection. But the Spirit is also the one who brings to fruition or completion what the Father starts and the Son takes up. The Spirit bears up the Son in carrying out the Father's wishes, like breath carries along the Word so that it finally comes to achieve, in our transformed lives, the ends of the one who sent it forth. Because the Spirit is one of empowerment to fruition or completion, the Spirit comes last when discussing the Trinity's work *ad extra* just as the Spirit is invoked last—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—in doxological praise of the Trinity's own dynamic life.

The first work of the Spirit is highlighted in baptism. In baptism the Spirit unites us to Christ and we are made Christiform through the gift of Christ's Spirit: Christ pours his Spirit out on us so that we now belong to Christ and are in that way made Christ-like (whatever the deficits of our own faith and life). We show forth Christ simply in virtue of the fact that we are attached to him by way of Christ's own Spirit. "By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit" (1 John 4:13). "But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness" (Rom. 8:9-11). This is the Spirit of adoption (Rom. 8:15) by which we are made children of God. This is the Spirit as the seal (of wax) in which Christ's image is found impressed.² "When we partake of the Spirit we have the Son; and when we have the Son, we have the Spirit."³

² Athanasius, *The Letters of Saint Athanasius*, trans. with introduction and notes by C. R. B. Shapland (London: The Epworth Press, 1951), 124.

³ Athanasius, *Letters*, 184.

Confirmation, on the other hand, bestows the quickening power of the Spirit, the Spirit that empowers, in and for the actual living of a holy life. This is the Spirit in and through which Jesus prays and acts in service of others (see especially Luke). “If it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom has come to you” (Matt. 12:28). This is the Spirit with which Jesus is anointed at the start of his ministry (and not, say, the working of the Spirit by which the Word becomes enfleshed at his birth)—the Spirit as unction. It is also the Spirit that Jesus gives his disciples for the empowerment of their mission to the world. It is the commissioning Spirit, then, of John 20:21-22: “‘As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” And, too, it is the Spirit of sanctification (see Rom. 1:4; 1 Cor. 6:11): “Perceive these three: the Lord who commands, the Word who creates, the Spirit who strengthens [also sometimes translated ‘confirms’]. What kind of strengthening is it? Perfection in holiness, which expresses itself in an unyielding, unchangeable commitment to goodness. Such holiness is impossible without the Spirit.”⁴ “I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit” (Eph. 3:16).

That the Spirit works differently in baptism and confirmation is already strongly suggested by the 1979 Prayer Book rites for baptism and confirmation. In baptism we are sealed by the Holy Spirit and made Christ’s own forever (BCP, p. 308). This is the Spirit that puts our old selves of sin to death and births us anew to live the very life of Christ resurrected. In the rites for confirmation we look back to this baptism whereby Christ has brought us to himself and bound us to his service, through his Holy Spirit as a Spirit of connection, of binding, of loving allegiance to Christ. But what confirmation specifically enjoins is a strengthening of commitment—a renewal of baptismal vows in that sense—for the purpose of sending the baptized forth in the power of the Spirit to perform the service set before them (BCP, pp. 309, 418). The Spirit here is not so much the Spirit of loving union as the Spirit that “strengthens” and “empowers,” “sustains” and “upholds,” “directs” and “leads,” “defends” and “increases” until

⁴ St. Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit*, trans. David Anderson (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997), 63.

the end of God's kingdom is reached in all its "fullness" (pp. 309-311; 418-419). The two workings of the Spirit that help distinguish baptism and confirmation (in ways that would align them with justification and sanctification, respectively) also seem implicit in several verses of the Great Litany: "That it may please thee [1] to give to all people increase of grace to hear and receive thy Word, and [2] to bring forth the fruits of the Spirit" (p. 150); "That it may please thee [1] to give us true repentance, to forgive us all our sins . . . and [2] to endue us with the grace of thy Holy Spirit to amend our lives according to thy Word" (p. 152).

Confirmation is distinctly different from baptism, then, and cannot be collapsed into it or its simple reaffirmation: Confirmation is for those who are already Christians, while baptism makes Christians out of those who are not. Confirmation assumes that the gifts of the Spirit, which have put us onto the path of new life in Christ (baptismal gifts), are already ours; while baptism addresses sinners, in their very movement from death to new life in Christ. Confirmation does not have to do with making people Christian, with reaffirming or solidifying that fact; it has to do with the revival and renewal of an already Christian life. It has a critical function with respect to the church, indicting it (potentially) for its failure, in any case reminding it of its responsibility to engage the world, to take the mission to the world seriously as a fundamental responsibility of all baptized Christians.

Baptism is our conversion from the world (of sin) to God the Father, through Christ our mediator, in the power of the Spirit. Confirmation is our conversion, back again, in love, to the world, following Christ's own mission for others, sent as Christ is by the Father for this purpose and enabled to perform it in the power of the Spirit. It is possible then to talk about a double conversion in the Christian life: to God (central to baptism) and (on that basis) to the world (something that confirmation might highlight). Pentecostals are trying to get at this double conversion, rather flat-footedly, by separating water baptism from Spirit baptism (with the latter being all about ecstatic gifts of witness and worldly service). But it is also very classical. Nothing is more common in Christian understandings of the Christian life than the *exitus-reditus* scheme. God goes out to us and on that basis we are returned to God—to worship and serve him—in a way that completes the circle. But the *exitus-reditus* scheme brings with it another *exitus*, another going out from God to the world again. In returning to God one is incorporated into the dynamic outflowing of God's own life for

the world; in returning to God we come to participate in God's own overflowing love for the world. Incorporated into Christ and therefore into Christ's mission from the Father for the world in the power of the Spirit, we are to become as Christ is: for others—and that means ultimately not for the church but for the world. Theologians as historically distant and distinct in religious sensibility as the twentieth-century Protestant theologian Karl Barth and the fourteenth-century Flemish mystic John Ruusbroec nevertheless concur on the importance of this movement out from God to the world on the part of those participating in the very life of God in virtue of their unity with God in Christ (obviously with no tie in their writings to confirmation!).

It is not by accident . . . that Jesus is for man as He is for God. . . . He could not be for God if He were not on that account for man. . . . The man Jesus is necessarily for His fellows as He is for God. For God first, as the One who gives Him His commission, as the Father of this Son, is for man. This excludes any possibility of the man Jesus not being for man as He is for God.⁵

[One] is caught up in the embrace of the Holy Trinity and eternally abides within the superessential Unity in a state of rest and enjoyment. In this same Unity, considered now as regards its fruitfulness . . . in the living fecundity of the divine nature . . . is the origin and beginning of an eternal going forth and an eternal activity which is without beginning. . . . Since the almighty Father has perfectly comprehended himself in the ground of his fruitfulness, the Son, who is the Father's eternal Word, goes forth as another Person within the Godhead. Through this eternal birth all creatures have gone forth eternally before their creation in time.⁶

In sum, "God is a centrifugal being. . . . Thus the basis of mission is to be found in the being of God himself."⁷

This understanding of confirmation has implications that allay ongoing worries about confirmation and about moves to strengthen its significance for the life of the church. For example, the sacramen-

⁵ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 3/2, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960), 217.

⁶ John Ruusbroec, *The Spiritual Espousals and Other Works*, trans. with introduction by James A. Wiseman (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1985), 148-149.

⁷ J. G. Davies, *Worship and Mission* (London: SCM Press, 1966), 28.

tal character of confirmation, on this understanding of it, would not threaten to replace or preempt the need for ongoing homiletic and pastoral efforts to precipitate growth in faith. The sacramental character of confirmation would merely be invoking the Spirit of sanctified living—the grace—that underlies and empowers all outward and visible growth on our part.

Because confirmation concerns here the movement of all those baptized in Christ towards the world, in service to it, there is nothing clericalizing about it, and therefore worries of that kind about Title 3, Canon 4, section 1a, might be mitigated somewhat. Confirmation or something like it could reasonably be expected as a condition for lay leadership positions, since confirmation is being so closely associated here with making service and witness to Christ one's full responsibility. But those leadership positions would not, as Title 3 suggests, be primarily identified with ministerial functions in any narrow church-oriented sense. Nor would confirmation convey any new status, and therefore amount to some sort of special lay ordination to the priesthood. Rather than a new status, confirmation conveys a strengthening grace of the Spirit necessary to live out baptismal gifts in the between times of trial and difficulty.

Perhaps most importantly, this understanding of confirmation does not undermine the sufficiency of baptism as full Christian initiation—any more than the additional sacramental standing of the eucharist does. Confirmation, on this understanding of it, does not serve to complete or ratify or validate one's baptism. It is concerned with something else—something distinctive—that does not encroach on baptism's territory, so to speak. This distinctive concern, moreover, presupposes full Christian initiation as that is achieved by baptism; it does not "float away" from baptism (as Aidan Kavanagh has mused), but builds upon its achievements and promise. For all its distinctiveness, confirmation remains in the closest continuity with baptism in virtue of baptism's own gifts of the Spirit with a mission-generating and life-transforming point. Baptism lays the foundations for and gestures towards what confirmation concerns; baptism itself points forward, to the sort of rearranged whole of life that confirmation tries to serve in its own distinctive fashion, by invoking God's efficacious working, in Christ's Spirit, for it.