

Baptism, Confirmation, and First Communion

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Confirmation and First Communion—A Study Book by Frank W. Klos (LCA) contains *A Report for Study*, which was issued by the “Joint Commission on the Theology and Practice of Confirmation,” a commission composed of men representing the ALC, the LCA, and the LCMS. This report was presented to the presidents of their respective synods in December 1967. Since that time two bodies, the ALC and the LCA, have in convention decided to carry out the program outlined by the Commission. The LCMS is to react to the report in its convention to be held in Milwaukee in June of this year (1971).

What is the gist of this report and how does it concern us of the WELS? Stated very briefly, the change that is being suggested, and is now being carried out by the ALC and the LCA, is to permit children to receive their first communion at an earlier age (8 to 10) and to postpone confirmation to the 10th grade age.

What are the reasons for making such a change? Various reasons are given. All of this stems from a study made a few years ago on the rite of confirmation. We shall go into the matter of confirmation more deeply a bit later. At this point let it suffice to say that the feeling is that an over-stressing of the rite of confirmation has brought about a down-grading of the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, that the impression left upon many a child is that Baptism is merely an initiative act to make a child a member of a congregation, but that the real effect of the sacrament will come later when after the renewal of the vow the child will finally be made certain of the effects of his baptism.

Another argument is that the child does not need to wait until confirmation to be ready for Holy Communion. Here it is pointed out that in the days of the Reformation the children of the church or Sweden under Bishop Petri were receiving Holy Communion at 8 or 9; in Denmark in the 16th century they were given the Sacrament as early as 6 or 7. According to the Roman canon law the age for Holy Communion ranges from 7 to 12.

However, it is not only the examples of the 16th century which made the advocates for early Communion speak as they do. They feel that children from 8 to 10 are very definitely able to “discern the Lord’s body” (I Cor. 11:29). With the “discerning” is meant the realization that the bread and wine are not ordinary bread and wine, but that there is a real presence of Christ’s body and blood. They believe also that children as well as adults can be taught what sinfulness means, the meaning of repentance, and the necessity of clinging to the promises and merits of Christ’s forgiveness.

In addition to this they believe that the participation in Holy Communion will be a part of the child’s sanctified life; it should assure the child all the more that he is already a child of God and a member of the Holy Christian Church, who does not have to wait until confirmation to become a full-fledged member.

There is no doubt that such statements make us reflect on the conditions that may exist in our congregations. Have we undervalued the Sacrament of Holy Baptism? Have we come close to making a semi-sacrament of confirmation? Have we neglected the child in his earlier pre-confirmation years? Does he have the feeling that until his confirmation he cannot rate himself as a full-fledged child of God? Let us be ready to examine our preaching and our practices. Have we been somewhat careless in our practices and left our children with wrong and detrimental impressions?

There is another reason, however,—a practical one—why we must be sure that we are teaching and practicing correctly. There will be members who will transfer to our congregations from the church bodies who are accepting this new practice. If we are certain that children should wait until they are of a more mature age before we admit them to Holy Communion, can we accept these children as communicant members when they received Holy Communion, let us say, already at the age of eight? We want to be sure that what we are doing is right. In order to be sure of our practices let us examine the three areas that need attention: Baptism, Confirmation, First Communion.

Baptism

“I baptize thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.” What does it mean when we baptize “in the name of”? It does not mean merely that we are doing so by the command of God. Much more is involved. “In the name of” means that the baptized person enters into a definite relationship with God. By Baptism we are “immersed into God”; we enter into a covenant relation with God and thus have been made partakers of His grace. In this covenant, which is unilateral on the part of God, God promises to be our Father. By means of it we have put on Christ (Gal. 3:26, 27), and we receive the gift of the Holy Ghost (Acts 2:38). There is need to stress that this covenant which God has made is *His* covenant of grace. We can do nothing to strengthen it; it is there in its full strength. We can reject it, just as we can reject any free gift which God is offering us.

By means of Baptism children are “born into the Christian church.” Children have been made disciples of Jesus Christ. But just as the disciples of Jesus Christ had to be instructed and had to experience many things before they came to the full realization of what discipleship meant, so it is with our children, and, for all of that, even our adults. Growth in faith and in sanctification will take place as we live our Christian lives in Christ and His Word.

Baptism is a “washing of regeneration, and a renewing of the Holy Ghost,” according to Titus 3:5. This means that Baptism brings with it the blessing of the Holy Spirit, through whom alone we have the strength to lead sanctified lives.

But what if we do not lead sanctified lives? That is not the fault of Baptism; it is our own fault. The wonderful thing about Baptism is that we can during our entire lifetime depend upon the covenant which God has made with us, according to His Word, Titus 3:7, “That being justified by His grace, *we should be made heirs* according to the hope of eternal life.” This is God’s promise, a promise which our covenant-God will always keep. Isaiah 54:10 gives us the certainty that God will never break His promise: “For the mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed; but my kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall the covenant of my peace be removed, saith the Lord that hath mercy on thee.”

What comfort do we derive from this unilateral covenant? The comfort is this that even though I know that I am a sinful human being, and will from time to time despise God’s covenant, I am still certain that forgiveness of my sins is mine when I repent and look to Christ in faith.

The Commission report indicates that Baptism has been used merely as an initiative rite to bring the people into the church. They accuse the church of overlooking the continued *use* of Baptism. They feel that this has been done by making the impression that we have been depending upon the confirmation rite to bring about a completion of the Sacrament of Baptism.

What effect does this have on the children? They indicate that our children receive little or no comfort of forgiveness when they live with the impression that their church status is in doubt until confirmation has taken place. If this is the case, it is deplorable.

The baptized child is to progress in his knowledge of God’s grace and in sanctification. He is to realize that his sins have been washed away. Since he possesses the Old Adam, he should realize that he is still a sinner, but the covenant which God made with him at his baptism is to assure him constantly of the forgiveness of his sins. In other words, baptismal grace is a continuous thing. God never breaks it; the covenant never ceases. How this assurance can be achieved in our children we shall discuss later.

Confirmation

The Roman Catholic Church considers confirmation a sacrament. This had to be rejected by Luther and his fellow Reformers, for nowhere in the Bible did they find any reference to a command to confirm, nor could they find a promise of forgiveness of sins attached to confirmation. Luther did not feel that a church rite was necessary; the important thing for him was that the pastor by means of instruction in the Word was convinced that the child was able to examine himself, that he was a penitent sinner and believed that Holy Communion

could assure him of the forgiveness of sins. Luther did not object to the use of a rite of confirmation if it did not *detract from Baptism*. His chief concern was that the child should receive thorough catechetical instruction, which was to be based on and grow out of Baptism. Parents and sponsors were to see to it that this instruction would be carried out, so that the faith, generated by Baptism, would remain alive.

One will have to admit that confusion arises when the so-called “vow” is identified with God’s covenant. The vow is merely a promise on the part of the sponsors or the parents that they will make an honest effort to keep the children in the true faith by means of Christian instruction. The covenant we have discussed previously.

The Commission proposes to postpone the rite of confirmation to the 10th grade age. In their report they state: “By this time a degree of wholesome self-confidence has been achieved. The youth now gives the impression of being more grown-up and dependable. Having better emotional balance he no longer evidences the tensions within himself and with others that he did previously” (*Confirmation and First Communion*, p. 204).

Actually, the Commission wants to look upon the process of confirmation as taking a longer period of time than merely a “two or three-year program.” The aim of the whole process of instruction is to give the child the feeling that he “belongs.” They deplore, and correctly so, that by means of a simple Sunday school course little can be accomplished. This is all the more so when the children come to the church only once a week, and very likely only the one hour of Sunday school, with no choice of participating in the church service. They feel that the child needs involvement in the actual church life. “The additional years would provide opportunities involving enrichment courses of various kinds connected with the church school and youth work, weekend retreats, and active involvement in religious and social issues” (*Ibid.*, p. 200).

The Commission says that the 10th grade age level would be a suitable time for the rite of confirmation because by this time the confirmand should know whether he wants to take the next step—involvement as an adult.

Much of what the Commission reports is quite true. Certainly every pastor admits that it is quite impossible to judge a child’s readiness for confirmation by merely checking his age. Some children, possibly because of the life’s experiences the Lord has given them, mature spiritually at an earlier age, whereas others mature much later. However, because of deep-rooted customs it may be difficult to carry out Luther’s thinking, namely, that each child should be admitted to Holy Communion only when he is ready for it. We must commend such pastors who are firm in their refusal to confirm children who in their estimation are not ready to receive Holy Communion.

The Commission suggests postponing the rite of confirmation to the 10th grade age. We would question that suggestion. A study of early adolescence indicates that in many cases the home influence is on the wane at that age. This is the time when the teen-ager wants to throw off restrictions. At fourteen he is beginning to formulate some rather strange thoughts, many of which are an outright rebellion against the Ten Commandments. We realize that the Commission’s intention is to have instruction continue during all the years of elementary schooling at least through the junior high school years; certainly much would depend upon the character and the thoroughness of the instruction. Let us now momentarily leave the topic of confirmation. Since it is linked so closely to Holy Communion, let us turn to the discussion of that sacrament.

Holy Communion

The Commission is advocating a separation between first communion and confirmation. The plan is to allow children of fifth grade age to receive their first communion at that early age.

Why? we would ask. The reason is that they look upon participation in Holy Communion as a necessary involvement in church life. Indeed, Holy Communion also means involvement, but it means far more than that!

Holy Communion is unique. It is administered only to those in full fellowship with us. In baptism the parents make the decision or give their consent. In the case of adult baptism it is the catechumen who asks for it or gives his consent.

Not so with Holy Communion. Here it is the church which decides who is to participate. Quite commonly the Lutheran Church has decided upon the ages of eleven or twelve as the earliest age for receiving the sacrament, although even then cases have to be decided in an evangelical manner. Confirmation instruction and the rite itself indicate the catechumen is considered “able to discern the Lord’s Body” and is able to “examine himself.”

We may look upon confirmation, or let us call it the readiness to partake of Holy Communion, not as an act that the church performs, but as an act performed by God Himself. The readiness is brought about by the contact with His Word, through which the Holy Spirit works the faith in the heart of the Christian, a faith which desires the forgiveness of sins and cherishes the assurance of the forgiveness granted him through this holy sacrament.

We may look upon confirmation as a life-long process. What seems to be a strong faith at the time of the church rite may shortly seem to be weak. On the other hand, God’s schooling during our entire lifetime may be looked upon as a “confirmation.”

What does this have to do with Holy Communion? The problem revolves about “worthy participation.” According to Luther’s explanation, we see that he calls attention to “for you,” in Jesus’ statement: “Given and shed *for you* for the remission of sins.” The realization that the Lord’s Supper is meant *for me* is a result of faith, engendered by Christ’s words of institution: “This is my body, this is my blood, given and shed for you.” A person who doubts or comes to the altar in unbelief, brings judgment upon himself, as we read in I Corinthians 11:29: “For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body.”

Now let us consider what may be happening when children are admitted to Holy Communion. The reasons given for early communion are three:

- 1) involvement;
- 2) confirmation is a life-long process; therefore children should be given the opportunity to partake as early as possible;
- 3) a simple knowledge of the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, the baptismal command, and the Words of Institution is all that is really necessary.

Here one would question the word “knowledge.” Does this mean a memorization? Does it mean the ability to read well? “Knowledge” of the Ten Commandments is a rather vague term. True, if one understands the full intention of God’s Commandments, that in itself could suffice. One can, and hopefully we do, teach the need for Christ by means of a study of the Ten Commandments; however, when one senses how whole church bodies misunderstand the purpose of the Commandments, what does one understand with an eight-year-old’s *knowledge*? So also with the Creed. Certainly it is our intention to teach Christ Crucified in our study of the Creed. However, when Christ is presented in such a manner that salvation is possible merely by following Christ’s example, is this “knowing Christ”?

Let us not overlook the fact that many of the pastors of the church bodies that have accepted the recommendation of the Commission are weak in the matter of instruction. Consider the statistic: “Nearly a third of the LCA clergy say that belief in Jesus Christ as Savior is not essential to salvation.” Dr. C. J. Curtis, an LCA theologian, states in his “95 Theses”:

“Doctrine divides, service unites.”

“It is not true that theological agreement should precede unity.”

“If you really want to understand what Christianity is all about, don’t ask the Christians, but rather ask the enemies of Christianity.”

Again, people who speak on this wise will hardly be interested in thorough indoctrination of their catechumens. We are happy to read the recommendation of the LCMS’ Commission on Theology and Church

Relations, issued recently in regard to the problem of early communion. This Commission upheld the present practice of confirmation at about the eighth grade and before first communion, saying that the tradition “has proved to be unifying and meaningful for the child and the church.” The report also stated that the preconfirmation period “better equips the children of the church to carry out the admonition of St. Paul: ‘Let a man examine himself and so let him eat of that bread and drink of that cup.’ ”

The Missouri Synod commission, moreover, expressed fear that “fewer children might take intensified religious instruction if confirmation and first communion were separated.” The fear is that in early communion parents would become lax in their insistence on more thorough indoctrination for their children. And if that takes place, would it not follow that the Sacrament of the Altar would become an *opus operatum*?

What does this mean for us?

What can we learn from the problems presented in the joint Commission’s recommendations?

We will keep in mind the criticism leveled at the Lutheran Church in the matter of baptism. We will ask ourselves whether we are neglecting to give our children the certainty of salvation which should be theirs on the basis of their baptism. Are we making this certainty which baptism should give them a conditional thing? Is there a danger that we do give the impression that the covenant established at the time of baptism is a bilateral arrangement, instead of unilateral—on the part of God only? Do the children feel that their “real” membership depends upon their confirmation?

We must encourage one another to give our children of elementary school age thorough instruction. The applications taught in connection with the Bible stories of our Sunday school course should seek to make our children certain that they are children of God; they should know the meaning of their baptism, namely, the certainty of the forgiveness of their sins.

We must call attention to the strength of the Christian day school. This is a system that would find it rather difficult to leave the child with the feeling that “he doesn’t belong.” Our Christian day school pupils can easily be taught that their parents are putting forth an all-out effort to supply them with a Christ-centered education—a costly thing especially in these days.

Do the children need Holy Communion at an earlier age? There is no reason why children who are instructed properly in God’s Word should feel that they do not have the forgiveness of sins. The Commission is making a point of the lack of “involvement” for these children. This may be the case if neglectful parents bring their children to church for one hour of Sunday school instruction, if this is the only contact they have with the Word, and if the parents themselves are neglectful in church attendance and in home devotions. Then the Holy Spirit will find many hindrances to His work. Children need more than one hour’s exposure to the teaching of God’s Word. We feel, therefore, that the fault may lie in the lack of thorough instruction. With proper instruction the children will learn to know their Savior as a loving, gracious Savior, who has given His life for their sins. Thus the desire for Holy Communion will be kindled—again through proper study of God’s Word. We hope and pray that this desire will be strong when the catechumens are of age for confirmation.

And, finally, what is the purpose of confirmation? Confirmation instruction should be a thorough preparation for Holy Communion. Luther looked upon it on this wise, and this is the emphasis which should be put into our confirmation instruction. This instruction merely emphasizes the importance of Baptism. Confirmation is not a renewal of the baptismal covenant, for that covenant stands forever. Nor is it a rite by means of which our children become members of the church, for they have been members ever since their baptism. Nor is it a graduation rite, marking the end of our Christian instruction. Our time for learning God’s mysterious and gracious ways will never come to an end until we are taken from this vale of tears to Christ in heaven. This fact must be impressed upon our confirmands.

This means, however, that we who are the preaching or teaching ministers of the Word will do all in our power to continue such instruction—by faithful study, careful planning, tactful encouragement—even if it does mean many hours of hard work. However, the pastor is not the only one to carry the entire burden of this work. Every congregation should have a board of education, whose duty it is to oversee the entire scope of Christian

education, from the cradle to the grave. When such a board will sense the immensity and the importance of Christian education on all age levels, they will not oppose the pastor, nor will they expect him to carry the full burden. They will be ready to study the problems and will try to find ways and means to solve the problems, be that by means of a second pastor in a larger congregation, a minister of education, an enlarged day school faculty, or in the smaller congregation a program to train Sunday school teachers, good and adequate teaching equipment including a suitable library—all these will surely help to make our educational program more complete and all-inclusive. May God give us the zeal to carry out such a program in each and every congregation of our synod! Then our children, teen-agers, and adults will have a good opportunity to “put on Christ.”