

Confirmation

Form in Search of Function

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he numbers were staggering. In early 2010, we decided to study confirmation in my congregation. Part of that study was to look at what happened to our young people after confirmation. I had some idea that those numbers weren't good, so they really didn't come as much of a surprise. But maybe I had become numb to how big the problem really was, because the numbers were still pretty jarring. In the 22 years from 1988 to 2009, there were 307 young people confirmed at Martin Luther. By mid-2010, 65 of those members had been transferred to another church within our fellowship. Especially in the Fox Valley, that number was expected. But then the numbers got scary. Only 63 of those 307 young people were still active members of Martin Luther. The remaining 179 had either been removed or released, or were inactive. Removing the transfers from the equation, because we don't know whether they are active in their current church or not, that means that only 26% of all our confirmed young people were still active members. 74% were gone. Not transferred to another WELS church, but gone. Those were kids who sat in front of me, or my predecessors, regularly, faithfully, for two to three years, hearing the Word, learning it, studying it, discussing it, memorizing it. And now they're gone, many of them gone from the kingdom, walking down the wide road to hell.

Numbers, of course, don't tell the whole story. We cannot make the same assumptions of those in the marketplace. If we are not having "success," we cannot assume that we must change our ways. The Spirit works in the way and in the time that he desires, regardless of our hopes and wishes (John 3:8; *Augsburg Confession* V). All we can do is scatter the seed; God grants the growth (1 Corinthians 3). Sometimes the harvest is hundredfold; sometimes the seed is eaten by birds; sometimes the young shoots are choked out by weeds (Matthew 13). Noah was a faithful "preacher of righteousness" (2 Peter 2:5) for 120 years, yet saw precious little results. If God has similar plans for our preaching and teaching, we humbly bow to his will. Nor should we be surprised that the devil is hard at work among us. The church militant is not a fortress out of the reach of Satan and his allies. As long as we are in the world, we face the constant assaults of the spiritual forces of evil. And Satan works even harder among God's people, harder still among the most vulnerable. Like a shark sensing blood in the water, the Accuser finds an appealing target in the weak Christian. All this reminds us that we can't use these statistics as proof of some failure on our part, an automatic indication that we are not doing what we should be.

At the same time, the numbers ought to give us pause. These aren't cold-called neighbors, already encamped in the army of Satan. These aren't firmly entrenched atheists or agnostics. These are our own people. These are children of God, loved by their parents enough to bring them to the miracle of rebirth in Holy Baptism, and a decade later to bring them to our confirmation class. These are people who profess to be Christians. If it is true that God's Word always works (and it is); and if it is true that our people are never more immersed in the Word than during their two to three years of confirmation class (which generally – if unfortunately – it is), then how do we explain the staggering losses immediately after that time of intensive study of the Word? If 60% of every Seminary graduating class not only refused their assignment but even fell from faith before their ordination, do we think that the BME would just write that off as "acceptable losses," because we live in a sinful world? Or would it push them to re-examine what they do?

This then becomes our task, to use the disappointing numbers to prompt us to examine ourselves, what we do, how we do it, and what we're hoping to accomplish. If our honest self-examination leads us to conclude that we are doing the best we possibly can with what God has given us, then praise the Lord and pass the gravy. But let's not be afraid to do the honest self-evaluation. If we can, don't we owe it to those we serve to try to do it better? Are there any excuses we can give for offering God anything less than our best?

SO WHAT ARE WE TRYING TO DO?

Examining any practice has to start with that question. Before we can answer how well we are doing, we have to know what we are trying to accomplish. In the area of confirmation, what we do is quite uniform – two to three years of instruction, centered around the Bible as it is summarized in Luther's Small Catechism, taught or at least led by the pastor, culminating in a grand ceremony near the end of the eighth grade year, after which we invite the newly confirmed to partake of the Lord's Supper. With very few exceptions, this is what you will find in nearly every church of our fellowship.

But why do we do it? And why do we do it in that way? And what are we trying to accomplish? Somewhat surprisingly, answers to those questions are far less uniform. In 2001, the Confirmation Ministry Task Force of the WELS Commission on Youth Discipleship (of blessed memory) sent a survey to all WELS pastors. The last of the 36 questions was "Check one statement which comes closest to your understanding of the central purpose of confirmation." These were the responses:

Preparation for the reception of the Lord's Supper	20.3%
Identify/participate more fully in the life and mission of the adult Christian community	27.2%
Renewal of one's baptismal covenant	4.5%
To commit oneself to Christ	9.0%
To become an adult member of the congregation	3.9%
Public profession of faith in which confirmands were baptized	18.2%
Other	17.0% ¹

For a practice in which we are quite uniform, it's somewhat shocking that no more than 27% of us could agree on any one reason why we are doing what we all seem to be doing.

If there is no consensus among pastors, we should expect to see a similar lack of consensus among our laypeople. I am aware of no widespread WELS study exploring this, but a small sample of members of my own congregation shows a little more consensus, but on a reason that a relatively small number of pastors gave. While instruction in the commandments figured prominently in their responses, even more common was an answer along the lines of expressing a lifelong commitment to Christ, a response that only 9% of our pastors gave.

Confirmation is something that has been done in the Lutheran church for nearly as long as there has been a Lutheran church, well over 400 years. And the practice predates the Lutheran Church by another

¹ "2001 Confirmation Survey," complete results available at the Youth and Family Ministry page of the WELS Connect site.

several hundred years. Something that we have done for that long, shouldn't we be agreed on why we're doing it? Something that we all do, and that we all do so similarly, shouldn't we be clear on what we're trying to accomplish? But there is currently no consensus – not among our people, not even among their shepherds. We know what we do, but we haven't really decided why we do it. We essentially have a form upon which we largely agree, but a whole host of functions, depending on who you ask. Isn't that a little backwards? Form should follow function, right?

A STROLL THROUGH HISTORY

Whenever we do any sort of examination, our first reaction as Confessional Lutherans is to turn to Scripture. God's Word alone is the lamp to our feet and light for our path. We study what God's Word has to say on a subject, establish principles drawn from the Word, and seek to draw applications from those principles. There's our first challenge with confirmation: Scripture is silent. Many of the things we've come to associate with confirmation are discussed at length, but confirmation is mentioned nowhere.² This, of course, does not make it wrong, just man-made. Not necessarily a bad thing, but to find the reasons we do what we do, or what we're trying to accomplish, we'll need to look elsewhere.

Maybe history can teach us something. Maybe we've just forgotten why we do it, and need a reminder. Maybe we haven't taught our people well enough, and we need to be clearer with them. So let's take a stroll through history, to see what we can learn about confirmation.³

Not surprisingly, since inspired Scriptures say nothing on the subject, the time of the Apostles knew nothing of confirmation. They did, however, take seriously the Lord's command to "baptize all nations." As the Spirit granted growth to the early Church, more and more were baptized. Often these baptisms were simple applications of water, as we see in Philip's baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26ff). The *Didache*, widely considered to be one of the earliest writings of the Christian Church, dating possibly to the first century, has this to say about the procedures of Baptism:

- 7.1 With regard to baptism, here is the teaching:
You are to baptize in this way. Once you have gone back over all that is in the Two Ways,⁴ you baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in living water.
- 7.2 However, if you do not have access to living water, then baptize in some other water; and if you do not have any cold water, then you can use warm water.
- 7.3 And if you cannot get access to either [running or still water], then pour water three times on the head in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

² Most notably, instruction in the truth of God's Word, passing on that truth to the next generation, and the need for preparation to receive the Lord's Supper are all goals drawn from Scripture. But the decision to combine these things (and others, as we shall see) into a system called "confirmation" was ours, not God's.

³ This will endeavor to be a very brief study of the history of confirmation. For a fuller treatment, from a WELS perspective, it's tough to beat Professor John Brenner, "A Brief Study of Confirmation," available at the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File, <http://www.wlssays.net>.

⁴ 1.1 of the *Didache* reads "There are two ways: one is the Way of Life, the other is the Way of Death; and there is a mighty difference between these two ways." The first several chapters of the *Didache* highlight that mighty difference.

- 7.4 Moreover, before the baptism takes place, let both the person baptizing and the person who is going to be baptized fast—along with as many others as are able to do so. Indeed, you must instruct the person who is going to be baptized to fast for one or two days before the baptism.⁵

The only customs mentioned are the use of “living water,” and fasting on the part of many involved. The other item of note in Apostolic baptism was that “in the early days, catechisation (*sic*) preceded baptism, as the accessions to the church were principally through adults.”⁶ “This is true because, as the Christian church grew and won converts from paganism, it had to safeguard itself by admitting to baptism only those who had been carefully prepared and instructed.”⁷ However, “in early Apostolic days, the instruction was confined to that which was absolutely essential, and baptism, whether of adults or of infants, represented full entrance and admission into the Church of Christ, without any additional ceremonies.”⁸

Before too long, those additional ceremonies developed to accompany the waters of baptism. The Church father Hippolytus (c. 170 – 235) describes an elaborate baptismal ceremony,⁹ beginning with anointing with the Oil of Exorcism, then the baptism with water accompanied by a Trinitarian confession, then anointing with the Oil of Thanksgiving, then the laying on of hands, and concluding with the seal of the sign of the cross, the kiss of peace and the now familiar exchange “The Lord be with you,” “And with your spirit.”¹⁰ Tertullian (c. 160 – 220), similarly describes baptism as having three parts (reflecting the threefold nature of the Trinity): the applying of the water, the anointing with oil, and the laying on of hands. Interestingly, Tertullian indicated that the Holy Spirit came not through the water, but through the laying on of hands.¹¹ This might explain why Hippolytus was so clear that, while the elders and deacons each had roles to play in a baptism, it was all done under the watch of the bishop, and he alone could bring the ceremony to a close with the laying on of hands, the sign of the cross, and the kiss of peace.¹² It is in these statements of the early church fathers that one can see the embryonic beginnings of what would become confirmation.

Over time, the church grew. Through mission work and through persecution, the church began to see the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise that he would have “witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). As the church scattered toward the ends of the earth, and more and more were brought into the Church through baptism, the bishops were no longer able to keep up, and no longer able to preside over every baptism. So a slightly altered custom developed, and the formerly unified ceremony was broken into pieces. The local priest was able to apply the water for the baptism, but since only the bishop was able to complete the ceremony by the laying on of hands, he would come around at a later date and finish the ceremony with the laying on of hands – thereby “confirming” the baptism that had

⁵ Thomas O’Loughlin, *The Didache: A Window on the Earliest Christians* (London; Grand Rapids, MI: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge; Baker Academic, 2010), 166.

⁶ Charles Theodore Benze, “The Liturgical History of Confirmation,” Vol. 3 of *Memoirs of the Lutheran Liturgical Association* (Erie, PA, 1906), accessed July 6, 2012, <http://www.blc.edu/comm/gargy/gargy1/Memoirs.Volume3.html>, 9.

⁷ Gustav K. Wiencke, “Confirmation Instruction in Historical Perspective,” *The Lutheran Quarterly* 7: 2 (1955), 99.

⁸ Benze, 9.

⁹ To be fair, there is debate whether *Traditio Apostolica* was in fact written by Hippolytus or some later author. The ceremony described is interesting even if it dates to the fifth or sixth century, as some contend.

¹⁰ Hippolytus, *Traditio Apostolica*, trans. Kevin P. Edgecomb, last modified April 30, 2011, accessed July 28, 2012, <http://www.bombaxo.com/hippolytus.html>, Ch. 21.

¹¹ Tertullian, *De Baptismo*, trans. Ernest Evans, 1964, last modified December 29, 2007, accessed July 28, 2012, http://www.tertullian.org/articles/evans_bapt/evans_bapt_text_trans.htm, Ch. 6-8.

¹² Hippolytus, Ch. 21.

been administered by the priest.¹³ With some already talking about the Spirit coming with the laying on of hands and not the water, it's not hard to see where this would lead. When they were all part of the same ceremony, such a thought made little practical difference. Now that the ceremony was being broken into pieces, one rite was becoming two rites, and one sacrament was becoming two sacraments.¹⁴

The church father Cyprian (d. 258) had already spoken of “both sacraments” in connection to baptism,¹⁵ although we need to bear in mind that the word “sacrament” wasn't used as technically then as it is today. What we can see from this is that baptism and confirmation were already becoming two separate rites. At the time of Innocent I (d. 417) there is a distinction between the anointing of baptism and the separate post-baptismal anointing that would soon become confirmation.¹⁶ The term *confirmation* is first found in the French Councils of Riez and Orange in 439 and 441, referring to the post-baptismal rite of the laying on of hands.¹⁷ In 460, Bishop Faustus of Riez preached a sermon on Pentecost where he stressed the importance of confirmation, claiming that it gave an additional strengthening of the Holy Spirit, more than what was present at baptism.¹⁸ This development continued through the Middle Ages, as Peter Lombard (c. 1100-1160), in his influential *Sententiarum Quatuor Libri*, listed confirmation among his seven sacraments,¹⁹ and called confirmation “the perfection of baptism.”²⁰ Shortly thereafter, Thomas Aquinas followed suit.²¹ So when the Council of Florence officially designated confirmation as a sacrament in 1439, it was really doing nothing new, but merely recognizing what many had accepted for centuries.²²

Already in this brief history we can see how the function of confirmation had changed in the first 1500 years of the Church. Originally just one part of the rituals around the sacrament of baptism, a nice tradition reflecting some biblical practices such as the laying on of hands, it had taken on a new function as a sacrament all on its own, through which the Holy Spirit was given, that some already considered more important than baptism.²³ But these changes pale in comparison to those coming in the next 500 years.

¹³ Described throughout this essay is the practice that developed in the Western Church. In the Eastern Church, the local priest was allowed to do the confirmation, so the three initial sacraments – baptism, confirmation, and first communion – were often administered on the same day. For the most part, this still continues to this day.

¹⁴ On this point, theologians with Roman Catholic leanings will engage in some, as we would consider it, “revisionist history.” Rather than viewing one sacrament being broken up over time, they view two sacraments being confused by the early church. For one example, see Max Thurian, *Consecration of the Layman*, trans. W. J. Kerrigan (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1963), 44.

¹⁵ Cyprian of Carthage, *Epistle 72: To Jubaianus, Concerning the Baptism of Heretics*, in Vol. 5 of *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, trans. Robert Ernest Wallis, edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1886), revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight, last modified January 28, 2010, accessed August 10, 2012, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/050672.htm>, v. 21.

¹⁶ Benze, 12.

¹⁷ Luther Lindberg, in *Confirmation: Engaging Lutheran Foundations and Practices* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999), 49.

¹⁸ Robert L. Browning and Roy A. Reed, *Models of Confirmation and Baptismal Affirmation* (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1995), 10.

¹⁹ Harold E. Warnke, “Ways of Our Fathers as to the Age of Communicants” (paper presented to the Northern Wisconsin District Pastoral Conference, Marinette, WI, October 25-26, 1971).

²⁰ Frank W. Klos, *Confirmation and First Communion* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1968), 43.

²¹ John M. Brenner, “A Brief Study of Confirmation” (paper originally presented to the joint Metro Conference meeting, Port Washington, WI, November 18, 1996, and revised for publication).

²² Arthur C. Repp, *Confirmation in the Lutheran Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), 15.

²³ Warnke, “Ways of Our Fathers”; Klos 44.

CONFIRMATION DURING THE REFORMATION

One doesn't exactly have to rack their brain to imagine how Luther would handle the Roman doctrine of confirmation. A "sacrament" that has no clear institution by Jesus, no command or promise from Scripture, yet is alleged to give a special, and necessary, dispensation of the Holy Spirit? And is more important than the divinely instituted baptism? As usual, Luther didn't mince words, calling it "deceitful mumbo jumbo of the episcopal idols,"²⁴ "monkey business...a fanciful deception,"²⁵ "invented to adorn the office of bishops, that they may not be entirely without work in the church."²⁶ Luther had no use for the contrived sacrament of confirmation.

What Luther was interested in was the Word and the sacraments – the divinely instituted sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Baptism was complete in and of itself; it didn't need any "confirming." The faith created at baptism needed to be fed through the teaching and learning of the Word, and people needed to be properly prepared to receive the Lord's Supper. That was all that mattered.

That gospel freedom explains Luther's attitude toward confirmation. If it had to be regarded as a sacrament, he had no use for it and wanted it gone. But as he so often did, he refused to succumb to the iconoclastic temptation to overreact. If confirmation could be given a new function, he was content to allow the form. "I would permit confirmation as long as it is understood that God knows nothing of it, and has said nothing about it, and that what the bishops claim for it is untrue. They mock our God when they say that it is one of God's sacraments, for it is a purely human contrivance."²⁷ He never developed a confirmation rite, but he gave his approval to at least two church orders that included one.²⁸

Not surprisingly, the Confessions followed Luther's lead. In speaking about the sacraments, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession states, "Confirmation and extreme unction are rites received from the Fathers that not even the Church requires as necessary to salvation, because they do not have God's command. Therefore, it is useful to distinguish these rites from the former, which have God's direct command and a clear promise of grace."²⁹ Note again the balance. Confirmation is not a sacrament and ought not be included alongside baptism and the Lord's Supper. At the same time, there is no condemnation of the rite, no forbidding of its use. It is a rite "received from the Fathers," and can be used as such. So long as it didn't have the function the Roman Church gave it, they felt free to retain the form.

It was in this evangelical freedom that more and more changes to confirmation began to flourish. Because there is no clear direction from Scripture, and because the Reformers didn't feel moored to the way confirmation had developed in the Roman Church, confirmation could be formed to fit many different functions. It was as though they had this unused rite lying around, like a piece of clay, ready to be molded into whatever an individual wanted it to become. Over the next centuries, it would take various shapes.

²⁴ Martin Luther, "The Persons Related by Consanguinity and Affinity Who Are Forbidden to Marry According to The Scriptures, Leviticus 18," *Luther's Works 45: The Christian in Society II*, ed. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 8.

²⁵ Martin Luther, "The Estate of Marriage," *Luther's Works 45: The Christian in Society II*, ed. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 24.

²⁶ Martin Luther, "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," *Luther's Works 36: Word and Sacrament II*, ed. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 91.

²⁷ Luther, "The Estate of Marriage," 24-25.

²⁸ Luther approved both Johannes Bugenhagen's Brandenburg Church Order of 1540 and Philipp Melancthon's Wittenberg Reformation of 1545; Repp, 17.

²⁹ *The Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, Article XII, para. 6, *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, ed. P. T. McCain (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House), 2005.

As identified by Arthur C. Repp, the different approaches to confirmation that flourished in the 16th century fall into four general categories.³⁰ Two more approaches develop over the next two centuries. Although these categories were rarely, if ever, found in their pure form, it is easy to recognize these four strains of thinking in the functions behind confirmation – both historically and currently.

The first approach to confirmation is barely recognizable as confirmation. While some discarded confirmation completely because of the unscriptural aspects it had picked up in the Roman Church, others essentially gutted it and (sometimes) kept only the name. This approach Repp calls the *catechetical* approach. It may have originated with the Waldensians in the late 12th century;³¹ beyond doubt it was the approach of many of the Reformers. Its emphasis was purely on education and instruction. It didn't bother with any sort of rite, and often tried to avoid even using the term confirmation, because that was beside the point.³² The point was growth in the Word, especially as preparation to receive the Lord's Supper. And when one was prepared to receive the Lord's Supper, they were simply presented to the congregation and admitted, almost always individually, rather than as a group.³³ Sometimes there was a form of an examination and/or a confession of faith, but this was far from universal, and where they existed, they were done merely to demonstrate to the congregation that the individual could receive the Sacrament worthily. Where these were done, they were often done for all communicants, not just those being admitted for the first time. The catechism was the heart of this approach to confirmation. Certainly Luther's Small and Large Catechisms were the shining jewels, but his were far from the only catechisms of the time. They were the focus of the catechetical approach to confirmation, and were not only taught, but were regularly the basis for preaching, so that the whole congregation could regularly review its teachings. This catechetical approach to confirmation was the most prominent approach in places where Luther and his students were most influential.³⁴

A second approach to confirmation exhibited in the 16th century should not be surprising to find among Lutherans. With a few exceptions, Lutherans usually want to hold on to as much as possible from the traditions handed down by previous generations. This was the desire of some in the area of confirmation. Many Lutherans thought that confirmation couldn't be cleansed of its errors, so they abandoned the term altogether. Others kept the term and some of the practices, but avoided things like the laying on of hands because they felt it sent a conflicted message because of the Roman teaching that the Spirit was imparted in that way. Still others felt that even this could be cleansed, and there could be an evangelical confirmation that was in many ways very close to the Roman rite. They sought to develop a Lutheran confirmation "according to tradition."³⁵ This approach is called by Repp the *traditional* approach.³⁶ The sought-for development never really happened in any unified way, except in one respect, that confirmation was never associated with first communion. It was tied to baptism, and to the catechetical instruction they taught should follow. There was a strong desire to keep the form of confirmation, but, only as much as necessary and no more, to adjust its function.

³⁰Others have identified similar categories, both before and after Repp. Benze, some six decades before Repp, identifies 3 categories: catechetical, sacramental, and church-disciplinary. Wiencke, over a decade before Repp, also identifies 3 views: indoctrination, sacramental and church membership.

³¹ Lindberg, 80.

³² Repp, 22-23.

³³ Klos, 57.

³⁴ Repp, 22.

³⁵ Repp, 44.

³⁶ When others identify only 3 categories of 16th century confirmation, this is the approach they leave out.

A third easily-identified approach to confirmation is in some ways the opposite of the first. Where the catechetical approach intentionally minimized or more commonly eliminated the entire rite, another approach strongly emphasized the rite, and can aptly be called a *sacramental* approach. This approach, while maybe not explicitly calling confirmation a sacrament through which the Holy Spirit was given, certainly spoke and acted as though it were. Where other approaches eschewed the laying on of hands, because they didn't want to introduce sacramental confusion, this approach embraced it. It arose primarily in those German areas that were also influenced by some Swiss Reformed ideas, where there was a distrust of the complete efficacy of infant baptism.³⁷ So this approach viewed confirmation as the completion of baptism, as evidenced in the rubric spoken at the laying on of hands, "Receive ye the Holy Spirit..." This function of completing a baptism would have been anathema to most Lutherans, but the form of confirmation was pliable enough to be able to be stretched to cover even this function.

A fourth 16th century approach to confirmation is closely associated with one individual, who has come to be known in many ways as the "father of confirmation." Martin Bucer, serving in Hesse in 1538, introduced a form of confirmation that had some new elements: a surrender to Christ in the form of a confession of faith, and a vow of obedience to the church.³⁸ Since both elements involved submitting to the discipline and hierarchy of the church, it can be termed a *hierarchical* approach. Bucer's prior congregation brought him into dealings with the Anabaptists, who denied infant baptism. They accused Bucer of encouraging loose morals by his baptizing of babies, who had not been instructed and could not confess their faith or commit themselves to Christ. He maintained the Scriptural doctrine of infant baptism, "however, the Anabaptist attack on his practice of baptizing infants was unsettling. Maybe they had a point. They maintained that infants could not consciously express their loyalty to Christ and his church."³⁹ So he created a rebuttal to the Anabaptists – a Lutheran "decision." "Bucer devised a plan by which children, who had been baptized in infancy and for whom a promise of loyalty had been given by sponsors, were required to take a vow of loyalty to Christ after they had reached the age of discretion."⁴⁰ For Bucer, that plan was confirmation. "When the baptized child had come to the age of discretion and was capable of thinking for himself, he could then be asked whether he would willingly place himself under church discipline."⁴¹ In many ways, Bucer took all the existing ideas about confirmation and brought them together into one: renewal of the baptismal vow⁴² following a period of instruction, prayers of the congregation on behalf of the confirmands, a non-sacramental laying on of hands, admission to the Lord's Supper, and acceptance of the discipline of the congregation.⁴³ Bringing all this into one rite earns Bucer the title of the "father of Lutheran confirmation." But it also had other effects. It fed the impression that "confirmation rather than baptism marks the beginning of membership in the church."⁴⁴ It introduced a very subjective idea into what had been a very objective form. By taking the existing form of confirmation and fusing together all of these different functions, it greatly elevated the importance of confirmation.

³⁷ Benze, 16.

³⁸ Repp, 29.

³⁹ Klos, 60.

⁴⁰ Repp, 30.

⁴¹ Klos, 60.

⁴² This was an emphasis of Erasmus, who was willing to accept infant baptism, but felt that at some point the child needed to publicly take for himself the obligations of discipleship; Klos, 49.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁴⁴ Lindberg, 53.

CONFIRMATION AFTER THE REFORMATION – PIETISM AND RATIONALISM

The subjective ideas of confirmation that were budding in the mind of Bucer in the 16th century would find full bloom in the 17th century, in Philipp Jacob Spener, the “father of Pietism.” In the century or so since Luther’s death, faith had become much more intellectual. As fine points of doctrine were discussed not only between Lutherans and Catholics, but also between Lutherans and various branches of the Reformed and even the more extreme wings of Lutheranism, there was a decline in the application of simple Law and Gospel to the lives of the people. Couple this with the ravages of the Thirty Years’ War, and there was a profound deterioration of parish life and morality. In the diagnosis of many, faith had taken up residence in minds, and had largely left hearts and lives. Spener was concerned about the situation, as many were. He was especially concerned about the number of people that were receiving the Lord’s Supper very casually; he feared they were receiving it in an unworthy manner. Since so many weren’t living like it, he wanted a way to be sure that his people were truly converted, and to “bring the head into the heart.”⁴⁵ He didn’t deny the regenerative power of baptism, but he minimized its continuing power in the lives of those who had been baptized.⁴⁶ For Spener and the Pietists, baptism was “regarded more as a covenant between God and man, than a layer of regeneration, so that infant baptism necessarily appeared incomplete and defective.”⁴⁷

As Bucer did before him, Spener considered the form of confirmation ideally situated to cover some new and needed functions. Spener saw confirmation as an opportunity to both provide that conversion experience as well as bring baptism to completeness. Catechetical instruction, which had been happening for years, found a new purpose. No longer was it simply to grow the faith that had been created in baptism; now it was to prepare the young person for their momentous conversion experience,⁴⁸ by leading them through the several stages of the way of salvation, with some even urging the teacher to strive to bring the children to “holy tears.”⁴⁹ In order to do this, the pastor wanted to have as much time as he could, so this became a primary impetus to lengthen the amount of instruction and delay confirmation.⁵⁰ “Before Pietism the catechumen was rarely older than 12 and usually a year or two younger. Under the influence of Pietism the church orders gradually required the catechumen to be older....Generally...the age was nearer 14.”⁵¹ Once the day finally came, it was a significant public ceremony, where the “young person would publicly declare his surrender to Christ. In addition, he would renew the baptismal covenant by vowing to keep his part of the covenant with God, as long as he lived. Memory verses were often introduced into the rite. Each confirmand would recite his own choice of a scriptural prescription for Christian living.”⁵² Overall, “subjective conversion experience and sanctification took the place of justification as the chief emphasis of the Lutheran Church’s understanding of confirmation.”⁵³ Baptism became less and less important, and one’s membership in the church didn’t really start until they were confirmed.⁵⁴

⁴⁵ Repp, 69. Other sources quote Spener as wanting to “bring the heart into the head.” The sense is the same.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁴⁷ Benze, 17.

⁴⁸ Klos, 67.

⁴⁹ Repp, 72.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁵² Klos, 67.

⁵³ Brenner, “A Brief Study of Confirmation.”

⁵⁴ Klos, 69.

Pietism was reacting to a valid concern, but it overreacted. So it would be expected for the pendulum to swing the other way, and that swing led to the Age of Rationalism. Once Pietism had essentially removed the foundation of the Word and sacraments and replaced it with the emotions and subjective experience, it was predictable that soon intellect and reason would supplant the emotions, and push Word and sacrament even farther into the background. This showed in the Rationalists' take on confirmation.

“It became important that every young person about to be confirmed understand and be able to explain the church's teachings. He should be able to repeat arguments for the existence of God and tick off God's attributes. He ought to be able to defend his faith against attacks from the rising scientism. Catechetical examinations soon became academic; confirmands crammed for their finals at church in the same way they did for academic subjects at school. They were being trained as apologists for Christianity.”⁵⁵

Rationalists further elevated confirmation at the expense of baptism, considering confirmation the second half of baptism – actually the more important half. Without confirmation, baptism was an empty ceremony with little purpose. With this confusion on baptism came also confusion on the doctrine of the church. Baptism was considered to grant you admission to the Christian Church, but admission to a specific denomination or congregation came only with confirmation.⁵⁶

Other external factors worked together with these theological factors to further pervert confirmation. Because these German congregations were part of the state church, confusion of the two kingdoms was almost inevitable. In some places, confirmation included instruction in civic duties, or health education. Church rites became state rites of passage. For girls, confirmation was often associated with their debut in society.⁵⁷ “Unless a person was confirmed, he was not permitted to leave the parish, go to work, join a guild, attend a state school, or go off to a boarding school.”⁵⁸ “The tax list and the voting list came directly from confirmation records. The right to hold office was also dependent upon confirmation.”⁵⁹

All these factors conspired to produce two significant lasting effects. First, all of this affected the timing of the ceremony. Considering all of its civic as well as religious aspects, confirmation really could not take place while the confirmand was still in school. Since for most students, formal education ended after the eighth grade, that became the natural time for the confirmation rite. Confirmation became graduation. And since most schools closed after Easter so their students could help in the fields, the natural day for confirmation became Palm Sunday.

Secondly, these factors affected how elaborate the rite was. With all of these implications, both religious and civic, confirmation became a big day – the biggest day of the confirmand's life. It was celebrated as such. Both churches and families pulled out all the stops. Churches were decorated with floral wreaths and foliage; they gave white robes to the confirmands, flowers to all the girls; there was special antiphonal singing between the congregation and the confirmands; sermons were greatly lengthened to highlight the importance of the occasion.⁶⁰ “Thus the Rite of Confirmation was theatrically decked out and developed into a tear-jerking melodrama. (Examples are mentioned of confirmands going to their

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁵⁶ Repp, 77.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁵⁹ Klos, 71.

⁶⁰ There are examples of printed sermons that ran as long as 53 pages; Repp, 78-81.

parents just before the confirmation rite to beg for their forgiveness and blessing, whereupon the parents spoke a few words and laid their hands upon the child's head.)”⁶¹ Families would host dinners and throw parties similar to the celebration of a marriage. Gifts were given, marking the confirmand's passage into the adult world. They were presented with adult clothing, in the fashion of their elders.⁶² In the age of Rationalism, we see the same pattern as in previous eras, with the form being kept, only slightly altered, to accommodate new functions.

COMING TO AMERICA

These are the influences our forebears carried with them into the New World. Many of these ideas continued through the 19th and 20th centuries, and knowing our Pietistic roots, they unsurprisingly could be found in our circles. For example, look at the rite of confirmation in *The Lutheran Agenda*, a rite long used among members and former members of the Synodical Conference:

“When you were little children, you were received into God's covenant of grace in Holy Baptism. And now, having learned the meaning of this covenant from your instruction in the Word of God, you are gathered here before God and this Christian congregation publicly to make profession of your faith in the Triune God and ***to confirm your covenant with Him, to dedicate yourselves body and soul for time and for eternity to your God and Lord...***

Do you this day, in the presence of God and of this Christian congregation, ***confirm the solemn covenant which at your Baptism you made with the Triune God?***

Do you, then, renounce the devil and all his works and all his ways?

Do you believe in God the Father?

Do you believe in God the Son?

Do you believe in God the Holy Ghost?

Do you ***desire to be a member*** of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and of this congregation?”⁶³
(*emphasis mine*)

Note the traces of confirmations past: the close tie to baptism, including a remnant of the exorcism and the confession of faith connected to it; baptism spoken of as a covenant that we make with God, that we confirm – a covenant that we “make stronger” with our vow; and until we make such a promise there is at least the implication that we are not a member of the congregation. The Gausewitz Catechism, used for decades in WELS, talks of a promise that we make at our baptism, which we publicly renew at our confirmation.⁶⁴ None of those are things that we'd want to explicitly teach our people, but they were part of our confirmation practices, implicitly taught for decades.

How many of those ideas still lurk around confirmation today? An interesting exercise, that I would recommend for all of us (but not now), is to work through the chart in Appendix A. Frank Klos put

⁶¹ Warnke, “The Ways of Our Fathers.”

⁶² Klos, 71

⁶³ *The Lutheran Agenda*, (St Louis: Concordia Publishing House), 23-24.

⁶⁴ C. Gausewitz, *Doctor Martin Luther's Small Catechism*, (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1956), 205.

together a list of many of the different aspects of confirmation coming from each of these six approaches. How many of them are in your congregation's practice? Are you comfortable with that, knowing the theology behind some of these practices?

Coming to today, the search continues for a definitive function for confirmation. With all of the functions that have been added to confirmation over the years, some have suggested that it's time to remove a few functions. In 1964, the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod and the American Lutheran Church accepted an invitation from the Lutheran Church in America to put together a “Joint Commission on the Theology and Practice of Confirmation” to study confirmation among Lutherans in America, and to make recommendations to their church bodies. Their report, issued December 28, 1967, made one major recommendation: “that first Communion and confirmation be separated as two distinct acts.”⁶⁵ Presenting their rationale in great detail, they recommended that first communion take place in “the latter part of the fifth grade,”⁶⁶ and identified “grade ten as the period most suitable for confirmation.”⁶⁷ They considered that preparation for reception of the Lord's Supper was a function that was best removed from confirmation. The ALC and LCA seem to have embraced at least parts of the recommendations, to such a degree that a 1993 ELCA study was able to report that “grade five is the usual time for admitting baptized children to the Lord's table.”⁶⁸ But a later confirmation was not as widely accepted, with only about 45% of ELCA congregations confirming in the ninth grade or later.⁶⁹ Acceptance in the LCMS was not as widespread, although a 1998 survey did indicate that while 82% still confirmed in the eighth grade, and 92% confirmed in the seventh or eighth grade, nearly 21% of congregations offered first communion at some point before confirmation.⁷⁰

In our own Synod, there was a similar suggestion that came some 20 years later. As the *Christ-Light* curriculum was being developed, there was some discussion about when the new curriculum would come to an end. That led Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Professor David Kuske, a consultant on the *Christ-Light* project, to author a paper entitled “Expanding the Nurture of High School Age Youth,” which was sent to every pastor and elementary and high school principal in February, 1992.⁷¹ He offered two proposals: first, “that there be a prescribed course of study for all high school age youth until January of their 12th grade year at which time a church rite would mark the completion of this prescribed course,” and second, “that our present practice of confirmation be continued in a slightly altered form in which we would agree that confirmation could take place within an 18-month window from the end of 7th grade to the middle of 9th grade depending on the individual congregation's particular situation.”⁷² Initial reactions were decidedly mixed, but more recent surveys reveal the full reaction. In the 2001 survey cited earlier, nearly 95% confirmed in the eighth grade, while less than 2% confirmed earlier than that. And only 0.2% of WELS congregations offered communion before a child was confirmed.

⁶⁵ Klos, 199.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 204.

⁶⁸ ELCA Division for Congregational Ministries, “The Confirmation Ministry Task Force Report,” (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Division for Congregational Ministries, 1993), 6.

⁶⁹ Ken Smith, *Six Models of Confirmation Ministry* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Division for Congregational Ministries, 1993), 34.

⁷⁰ LCMS Department of Youth Ministry, *A Study of Youth Confirmation and First Communion in the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod* (St Louis: Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, Department of Youth Ministry, 1998), 14, 16.

⁷¹ Joel W. Prange, “Confirmation – Current WELS Concerns” (paper presented to the Arizona-California District Pastoral Conference, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Tempe, Arizona, October 29, 1997).

⁷² David P. Kuske, “Expanding the Nurture of High School Age Youth” (undated paper available at <http://www.wlsessays.net>).

While there have been these proposals to remove functions from confirmation, there have been others suggesting adding still new functions. Congregations both inside and outside our fellowship are using confirmation to build relationships within the congregation, to teach Lutheran history as well as Scriptural doctrine, to offer exposure to other parts of the Lutheran Confessions in addition to the Small Catechism, to teach whole families and strengthen family bonds, and to incorporate the youth into the mission and work of the congregation, with some going as far as to refer to confirmation as a “commissioning,” or even an “ordination.” To the observant eye, it can easily seem that every few years someone is trying to bring yet another new function under the big umbrella of confirmation.

What this produces, and has produced for centuries, is confusion. Pick up nearly any writing on confirmation, and you’re likely to find a whole new definition of what confirmation is. I considered listing some of them here, but I could literally go on for pages, using only Lutheran sources. And again, this is nothing new. Nearly every historical study of confirmation ends with the conclusion that such a history is confusing and convoluted, and that never in the history of the Lutheran Church, nor even the Christian Church, has there ever been anything like a standard, commonly accepted definition for confirmation – neither what it is, nor what it aims to accomplish. Even the Roman Church, despite its reliance on tradition as an authoritative source of doctrine, struggles to define and give purpose to confirmation, with one author lamenting: “Confirmation today does seem to be a sacrament in search of its roots and meaning, and the search is filled with equivocation over what is being searched for.”⁷³ Similar thoughts have been expressed for years from within the Lutheran Church. A sampling, along with the year each was written:

- “The whole sixteenth century presents such unsettled and various positions and views with reference to this subject, as now awaken our astonishment.” (1883)⁷⁴
- “One of the most striking features of the 16th-century development of confirmation and preparation for first Communion is the almost total lack of uniformity.” (1964)⁷⁵
- “Still there is not yet a uniform view of the full meaning of confirmation.” (1906)⁷⁶
- “The understanding of what confirmation means has varied with the views currently held as to the meaning of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, as well as the meaning of the church.” (1955)⁷⁷
- “Confirmation as it exists in present practice is a curious mixture of feelings, assumptions, hunches and traditions liberally blended into both a process and a rite that is hard to explain.” (1968)⁷⁸
- “Confirmation has been a tangled web, a maze of confusion, a complicated and controverted practice since the beginning. Confirmation is still searching for theology and rationale. Even though its practice has been taken seriously – perhaps too seriously – for centuries, its theology and meaning have seldom if ever been clear.” (1999)⁷⁹
- “Attempting to define confirmation is a little like trying to nail Jell-O to a wall.” (2009)⁸⁰

⁷³ Aidan Kavanagh, *Confirmation: Origins and Reform* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1988), 42.

⁷⁴ Beale Melanchthon Schmucker, “The Rite of Confirmation in the Lutheran Church,” *The Lutheran Church Review* 6 (April 1883): 90.

⁷⁵ Repp, 55

⁷⁶ Benze, 18.

⁷⁷ Wiencke, 113.

⁷⁸ Klos, 15.

⁷⁹ Lindberg, 43-44.

⁸⁰ WELS Commission on Youth Discipleship, *Confirmation Ministry Self-Study* (Milwaukee, 2009), 4.

EXAMINING THE ADIAPHORA

Since there isn't a command from God regarding confirmation, that puts this whole thing in the realm of adiaphora. But that, of course, doesn't mean it's the end of the discussion – “We're free to do this, so we should do it, and you can't stop me!” – but it's only the beginning of the discussion. So let's ask the questions we need to ask with any adiaphoron: Is it beneficial? Is it edifying?

Although there is no single definition or description of confirmation, there are certain practices that are common, almost universal, among us. Let's examine some of those practices, to ask, now that we know the history and purpose behind them, whether they are still beneficial for us today.

- **CONNECTION TO BAPTISM**

Lutherans confess the clear teaching of Scripture that baptism is unilateral and complete. God, acting entirely on his own, with no cooperation of any kind on our part, brings us new life, and brings us into his family through the washing of baptism. And when God acts in baptism, he doesn't act only partially, nor does he require any action on our part. Since we know this, we need to be careful how we speak concerning confirmation. In years past, some Lutherans would use statements like “When you were baptized a check was made out in your name to eternal life. On your confirmation day you cashed the check.”⁸¹ This elevates confirmation at the expense of baptism, and turns baptism into something significantly less than what it is. Speaking of “renewing a baptismal covenant” is confusing at best, heretical at worst. Does a covenant that God made ever need to be renewed? How could we possibly renew a covenant that God made unilaterally? Even speaking of “confirming” or “affirming” a baptismal covenant would seem to open the door to a misunderstanding about the covenant God made with us at our baptism. At times it has been said that the confirmand is renewing, or taking on themselves, the promises made by their sponsor (allegedly on their behalf) at their baptism. This understanding of the role of the sponsor (to speak for the child until he can speak for himself) seems again to confuse the unilateral nature of baptism. And what of those who have no sponsor, or whose sponsor makes no unique promises, as in our current baptismal rite? Speaking this way only invites confusion. Thankfully, this type of speaking has largely disappeared from more recent WELS publications, although as the 2001 survey indicates, it may not have completely disappeared from our thinking.⁸² The things we ought to be doing with our baptismal covenant are to praise God for it, thank him for it, appreciate it and celebrate it.

We live every day in our baptismal grace. The *Christian Worship: Supplement* hymn expresses it so beautifully: “God's own child, I gladly say it: I am baptized into Christ!”⁸³ Not “I was baptized,” but “I am baptized.” Every day is a day that we live under the shower of our baptismal waters. That said, it seems questionable to proclaim that confirmation “is grounded in baptism,” and “flows out of baptism.”⁸⁴ That seems to introduce a sacramental aspect to confirmation, or at the very least, create more confusion. Confirmation has no more, and no less, connection to baptism than every other day of our lives.

⁸¹ Donald L. Deffner, “Confirmation,” in *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, ed. Fred L. Precht (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1993), 388.

⁸² The Rite of Confirmation in *Christian Worship: Occasional Services* does not speak of “renewing” nor even “confirming” our baptismal covenant. Nor does the currently used Catechism, by Prof. David Kuske. However, in the 2001 survey of WELS pastors, a disturbingly large 4.5% indicated their central purpose for confirmation was “renewal of one's baptismal covenant.”

⁸³ *Christian Worship: Supplement*, 737. Text: Erdmann Neumeister; tr. Robert E. Voelker, © 1991 Robert E. Voelker.

⁸⁴ ELCA, “The Confirmation Ministry Task Force Report,” 3.

- **INSTRUCTION IN THE WORD**

Is there ever a time when instruction in the Word is not beneficial? We are thankful for the privilege of being able to teach these young people God's saving truths. We are thankful for the heritage of strong Lutheran catechesis that has been passed down to us. Can we do better? The answer is always yes. Might our teaching have the Rationalistic tendency to be too academic, as though we were merely imparting information, rather than applying the living and active Word of God to young lives? Might we give the impression, however unintended, that we're trying to cram an entire lifetime of learning into a 13-year-old mind, that we're training Christian apologists for their life's work? God willing, a future conference will include a discussion of ways we might be able to improve in this area.

- **CONFESSION OF FAITH**

Could a Christian giving confession to their faith ever be a bad thing? This is certainly a beneficial practice. After young people have spent two to three years in an in-depth study of the Word, they are given an opportunity to confess publicly the faith they have learned from Scripture. Before they receive the Lord's Supper in a congregation, they publicly confess the faith of the congregation. This is a good thing.

Some cautions are in order, however. While a confession of faith is a good thing, a coerced confession is significantly less good. Are the confessions of faith our confirmands make always voluntary, or are they occasionally something else? Secondly, beware the subjectivism of the Pietists. Confessing the objective teachings of Scripture is one thing; the wildly subjective "what Jesus means to me" is something different.

Finally, if this is such a good thing, why do we limit the opportunity only to our teenagers? Couldn't this be equally good for other times? What about a confession of faith during the marriage rite? A confession of faith by the parents during the baptismal rite? By Church Council members at installation? By the widow at a funeral? Are those any more or less fitting than a teenager's confession at confirmation?

- **VOW OF FAITHFULNESS**

Much of what was said above can be repeated here. Making a commitment to follow our Savior is a good thing. Similar cautions are also in order. Remember where confirmation picked up these "vow" ideas, and seek to avoid repeating their errors. Is this still, to some, the Lutheran "moment of decision," a chance to clean up lingering discomfort with infant baptism? Further, beware of coerced "commitment" (which of course is no commitment at all). While we can't read hearts, when we invite a promise of life-long faithfulness from someone who is rarely in worship, are we inviting a lie? Guard also against giving the impression that this is the most important commitment one will ever make, rather than just one day in a series of daily commitments we make all our lives. And again, if this public commitment is good for the confirmand, could similar commitments be repeated at other stages of life? At times the vow of confirmation can be used by others as a club of discipline; such legalistic practices are to be avoided.

- **LAYING ON OF HANDS**

This is a custom mentioned in several places in Scripture – descriptive, not prescriptive. As such, it could be put to good use. At the same time, for many the laying on of hands has sacramental overtones, as though the Spirit is conveyed through the hands. Since we have no such promise in Scripture, we dare not give that impression. Different congregations may have different sensitivities toward this practice.

In the same vein, we want to be careful about doing other things that would send the message that this is a sacrament, a special imparting of the Holy Spirit. Think about confirmation bulletins, the banners, the certificates, and the gifts you have seen. How many of them include an image of a dove? Or fire? Why? Do these images give a sacramental impression of confirmation? Even the paraments of Pentecost could give the impression that confirmation is some sort of Pentecost-lite, when the Holy Spirit descends on these young people. Could that be the reason *Christian Worship: Occasional Services* suggests using the color of the season for confirmation rather than the red of Pentecost?

- **CONNECTION TO LORD’S SUPPER**

Going back to its roots, confirmation had no connection to the Lord’s Supper. It was only once it began taking on other functions that preparation for first communion became one of them. For many, this has become the central function of confirmation. This is, of course, a valid choice, but when this function is combined with other functions, difficulties creep in. Those other functions often require a higher level of maturity or knowledge than that required to receive the Lord’s Supper. If we want to make sure we cover as many topics as possible in our confirmation class, then we will want to delay confirmation. If we want to make sure someone can give a clear, full expression of their Christian, Lutheran faith, then we delay confirmation. If we want to make sure someone is mature enough to commit themselves to following Jesus even to the point of death, then we delay confirmation. But to receive the Lord’s Supper, one only needs a basic understanding of the truths of the Christian faith: to be able to recognize the body and blood of Christ as they are truly present in, with and under the bread and wine, to remember Christ’s death and its significance for us, and to spiritually examine themselves. Certainly this requires maturity beyond that of a first-grader, but does it require the maturity of an eighth-grader? The early church, and the Reformers, would have shrieked at the idea of making an active member of our churches wait until age 15 to begin receiving the Lord’s Supper. Yet we do, regularly. And we do it mostly because we have combined this with other functions for confirmation. How many of our seventh-graders, or sixth-graders, or even fifth-graders, are prepared to receive the Lord’s Supper? Does one need to be able to recite all six Chief Parts before one can receive the Lord’s Supper in a worthy manner?⁸⁵ Some will cite fellowship concerns,⁸⁶ that one needs to fully understand everything we teach before participating in the joint confession of faith made at the Lord’s Table, but for those who subscribe to the “unit concept” of fellowship, that concern is unfounded. We have been in fellowship with our children from the day they were baptized, and if we put the biblical “unit concept” into practice, then communion fellowship is no different than prayer fellowship, and who of us doesn’t pray with our children? For a fuller treatment of this question, Appendix B is a white paper commissioned by the Commission on Youth Discipleship, “Can Children Properly Receive the Lord’s Supper in WELS Congregations?”

We are withholding the Lord’s Supper from those who are prepared to receive it, of that there can be no question. The only questions are, do we have good reason to do so, and what are the unintended consequences? Are we keeping one of the Spirit’s powerful gospel tools sheathed? If we separate

⁸⁵ It could also be pointed out that we regularly confirm and commune those with limited mental capacity, those who are in some way developmentally disabled, etc. Often, these members don’t even reach a fifth-grade level of maturity, yet we take them through some sort of a “simplified catechism,” after which we confirm and commune them. We often refer to these as exceptions, but these exceptions demonstrate what we consider absolutely vital for reception of the Lord’s Supper, as opposed to the significantly higher bar we set for non-exceptional cases.

⁸⁶ As does Kuske, “Expanding the Nurture of High School Age Youth,” among others.

admission to the Lord's Supper from confirmation, and commune earlier than we currently do, might our children benefit from this additional connection with the means of grace, while they are at the same time immersed in the Word in confirmation class?

- **“COMMUNICANT” MEMBERSHIP**

I will confess some ignorance in this area, but I wonder what purpose is served by classifying a certain portion of our membership as “communicant.” Does that just further an existing misconception about the membership status of our pre-confirmed children? Do we give the impression to our children that they are some sort of second-class member – the future of the church, but not really the present? Or even worse, that they are not members at all, until they are confirmed? These erroneous ideas are floating around our past; have we fully rid ourselves of them, or are we unintentionally perpetuating them? My church, and I suspect we're not alone, classifies members as “communicant” or “youth.” Is a 13-year-old confirmand no longer a “youth”? Is a 19-year-old who has consciously chosen to delay confirmation relegated to “youth” status? Is there advantage to the statistic of “communicant,” or could we simply classify members as “youth members” and “adult members”?

- **GOWNS, FLOWERS, DECORATIONS, CLASS PICTURES, CLASS HYMN, FAMILY PARTIES, ETC.**

A visitor comes to your congregation, knowing nothing about Lutheranism or even Christianity. He comes one week and there is a baptism; the visitor watches as a young family brings their baby to the font to be baptized. That same visitor comes the following week and the Lord's Supper is celebrated; he watches as people seriously, almost somberly, march up to the front of church and then back. The same visitor comes a third week in a row, and this week it's Confirmation Sunday. To the mind of that visitor, who knows nothing about Christianity or Lutheranism, which have you by your actions announced is the more important event?

These external trappings were brought into confirmation by the Rationalists, who were marking the end of something. In both the timing of the ceremony as well as its extravagance, Rationalism celebrated the terminal nature of confirmation, with all the pomp and circumstance. Today, we cling to the pomp and circumstance, then complain when people see it as terminal. If we want people to stop seeing it as terminal, then maybe we should stop acting as though it were terminal. Maybe, if we want to combat the “graduation syndrome,” we start right here, and we decide to stop dressing confirmation up as though it were graduation. To (loosely) paraphrase John the Baptist, “Baptism and the Lord's Supper must increase; confirmation must decrease.”

- **“BATCH” CONFIRMATION**

When I started high school, I was 4 feet 10 inches tall, 87 pounds. I did not reach 5 feet tall until the summer before my junior year. I stand before you today as a man of extremely average height and weight. My point? I matured physically much slower than many of my classmates. That should not surprise us. We understand that children mature physically at different rates; we understand that they mature emotionally and intellectually at different rates. So why do we act as though children mature spiritually at exactly the same rate? Why do we confirm all our children, almost automatically, at the end of the eighth grade year – never before, almost never after? However we define confirmation, whether we use it as

admittance to the Lord's Supper, or for some other purpose, do we really think that no child is ever ready before the end of the eighth grade year? Or that no child might be better served waiting until after that, without the stigma that comes from being the one that isn't confirmed with their class? Might we be better off making the day of confirmation more individual? Isn't that how we handle baptisms and often adult confirmations? If throughout the course of the year we periodically had confirmations of one or two young people at a time, after they, their parents, and their pastor agreed that they were ready, without all the pomp and circumstance, might this help bring confirmation into a more reasonable place, and maybe be a small piece of the answer to the "graduation syndrome"? Might this make our young people and their families consider more the purpose behind confirmation, if they had to request it, as opposed to us just assuming it?

- **EIGHTH GRADE CONFIRMATION**

Entire essays have been written on the age of confirmands. Several points mentioned above have relevance here. Before we can decide what might be the best age for confirmation, we have to decide our purpose for confirmation. If our main purpose is preparation for the Lord's Supper, do we need to wait until the end of the eighth grade? If our main purpose is to invite a firm commitment of life-long discipleship, is that too much to expect of an eighth-grader, and should we wait another few years? But if we wait another few years, are we withholding the Lord's Supper unnecessarily from those who could be benefiting from it? Let's decide what we want our confirmation to do, what our purposes are, and only then will we be able to decide what age will be the most appropriate age for confirmation, if age is even a consideration. Once we know what we want confirmation to do, maybe we'll decide, as some already have,⁸⁷ that age shouldn't be a major factor.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

For hundreds of years, confirmation has been a form in search of a function. We have kept confirmation, and many of us still do largely the same things, even if we are not sure of nor agreed on why we do them. We've seen some of the challenges that has caused. So will we blindly regurgitate what has been done in years past? Will we continue to insist on the sameness of the form, even without agreement on the function? That would seem very unfitting for descendants of the Wauwatosa Theology. Instead, let us decide that form will follow function. Let us decide our function, then build our form around it.

There have been calls to do just this for many years. It seems that nearly every time someone studies confirmation, they come away with the conclusion that some changes need to be made. Again, a sampling, including the year they were written. All but the first two are WELS authors.

- "There is occasion for a renewed examination into its true meaning and the right order for its administration." (1883)⁸⁸
- "Still there is not yet a uniform view of the full meaning of confirmation." (1906)⁸⁹

⁸⁷ "Perhaps the church should face the fact that age is always a questionable criterion for determining when to confirm." Repp, 190.

⁸⁸ Schmucker, 103.

⁸⁹ Benze, 18.

- “I am not totally convinced that our present practices of confirmation are correct and proper....I was perfectly happy before I was assigned this paper. Now I have my doubts.” (1969)⁹⁰
- “There are elements in our present confirmation procedure that do not appear to be consistent with our theological understanding either by their actual existence or by implication. We cannot simply dismiss these matters from the vantage point that this is how we have always done it. Tradition does not make right, not scripturally right nor practically right.” (1971)⁹¹
- “Are not some 10- or 11-year-olds ready for the sacrament? Could not many of them, if instructed and prepared for that goal, be ready?” (1982)⁹²
- “It is going to take years of education and instruction with our people to change some of these traditions and customs. But I believe that it is time we did something.” (1987)⁹³
- “If I had my druthers I would like to see the Lord’s Supper given at a younger age, probably at the end of grade 5, and then the confirmation rite at the end of 10th grade....There must be a better way to do things in the future.” (1994)⁹⁴
- “Perhaps we need to rethink our approaches to children’s confirmation.” (2001)⁹⁵
- “If we take another cue from early Lutheran practice, would it be preferable to instruct children and then begin communing them at a younger age?...The more I think about it, the more it seems the early Lutherans had it right.” (2003)⁹⁶
- “I submit that we need to use far more discretion and care when it comes to guarding not just the back door but the front door...Let’s stop setting ourselves up for failure. Let’s not simply and in factory-like fashion churn out little robotic reciting teenagers fresh off the confirmation assembly line’s conveyor belt each spring.” (2007)⁹⁷
- “This paper has given me the opportunity to think about confirmation in a way I never have before. It has left me wondering if maybe the time has come for a change.” (2012)⁹⁸

Some of the same questions have been asked for decades, just in our circles. Yet we’re largely doing the same things we did decades ago, and still wringing our hands over the same problems. When do we reach the tipping point where we will actually do something? When do we decide that “the way we do it” is no longer good enough?

This is not to say that it will be easy. Many of our people have an infatuation with confirmation that can be described as unhealthy. They don’t like it when someone tinkers with confirmation.

⁹⁰ Fredrick Fallen, “Present Confirmation Trends,” (paper presented to the St. Croix Conference, Minnesota District, 1969).

⁹¹ Ronald K. Heins, “The Age of Communion and Confirmation in Light of Recent Trends in Lutheranism,” (paper presented to the Dakota-Montana District Pastoral Conference, Mobridge, SD, April 13-14, 1971).

⁹² Dale R. Schulz, “Our Instruction and Confirmation Practices – Is It Time for a Change?” (paper presented to the Pastor-Teacher Conference, Winnebago Lutheran Academy, April 19, 1982).

⁹³ James E. Werner, “Confirmation: Is Eighth Grade the Right Age?” (paper presented to the Central Wisconsin Teachers’ Conference, Western Wisconsin District, St. Paul’s Lutheran Church, Ixonia, WI, February 26, 1987).

⁹⁴ Larry Zessin, “Confirmation: History, Purpose and Practice,” (paper presented to Pastor/Teacher Conference, April 10, 1994).

⁹⁵ John Strackbein, “Approaches to Youth and Adult Confirmation,” (paper presented to the Caribbean Lutheran Pastors’ Conference, April 25, 2001).

⁹⁶ Scott J. Stone, “Our Confirmation Practice,” (paper presented to the Arizona-California Pastors’ Conference, Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran Church, Tucson, AZ, October 28, 2003).

⁹⁷ Mark Schwertfeger, “Dealing with Diversity in Children’s Confirmation Class,” (paper presented to the St. Croix Pastoral Conference, Minnesota District, Christ Lutheran Church, Cambridge, MN, February 13, 2007).

⁹⁸ Paul A. Cerny, “Confirmation Methods and Practice,” (paper presented to the Winnebago Pastoral Conference, St. John Lutheran Church, Montello, WI, April 16, 2012).

“The most amazing fact about confirmation is that it is generally taken for granted in most congregations. In fact, those who from time to time question its validity or the effectiveness of some of its shaky practices (many of which have grown up around confirmation silently and slowly like moss covering a woodland boulder) are considered troublemakers. They are apt to be classified in the same category as those who challenge the sanctity of motherhood or who suggest mistreatment of the nation’s flag.”⁹⁹

I’m sure we’ve seen this. I’ve had members leave my congregation because we thought about considering the possibility of maybe doing something just a little different in our confirmation practices (which we ultimately decided not to do). Our people think this is a huge deal – and can we blame them? It’s what we’ve taught them.

So maybe there’s where we start, by teaching our people. Teach them the purposes of confirmation. Teach them our goals in confirmation (once we’ve figured them out). Teach them the proper place for confirmation in our lives of discipleship. Stop teaching what we never wanted to teach them in the first place. Teach them a little of why we do what we do, of where some of our practices come from, especially if we decide some of those practices are no longer as beneficial as some once considered them. Teach them what we could be doing better, and then do it. Beware of trampling on sensitive consciences, but don’t be held hostage by stubbornly misinformed ones, either. We don’t have to all be doing the same thing, so we don’t have to wait for permission from above, or for someone else to tell us what we should do.¹⁰⁰ We live in the freedom of the Gospel; that freedom enables us to change this form to be sure it meets our people’s needs today, and that could be different from age to age and from congregation to congregation. It will take leadership, but this is what we’ve been called to do, and we have God’s promise that when we do the best we can with what he has given us, he will bless the work we do in his name. Will this be the magic bullet? Will this solve all our challenges with retention of our youth? Of course not. We have not addressed our methods of confirmation instruction. We have not addressed the vital role that parents need to play, and how church and home need to work together to carry out their shared responsibility to bring up the next generation in the instruction of the Lord. These are critical issues that always need examination and areas in which we can always improve. God willing, these will be the subject of a future paper.

We’re Lutheran; we will hold on to tradition until and unless that tradition becomes unusable. “Change for the sake of change” is decried among us, and rightly. So in the area of confirmation, we have tended to think that we are doing what our spiritual ancestors passed down to us, that we are honoring the history and accumulated wisdom of the church by continuing to do what we are doing. But that is a caricature. Exploring the history of the practice of confirmation, what really has been handed down to us is not so much our current practice, but the practice of changing our practice to fit our needs – adapting the form to fit our function. It’s time to start doing that. It’s time to decide our functions, and then to adjust this form accordingly. And as we do, may God grant us the blessings that only he can – to his glory and for the good of his people.

-SDG-

⁹⁹ Klos, 9.

¹⁰⁰ But we do have to be brotherly, especially in areas where our congregations and our people are so close to each other. If you are inclined to make some changes to your confirmation practice, please don’t neglect the important step of discussing your plans with your brothers. Let Christian freedom always be balanced by brotherly love.

Appendix A

Comparison of Six Lutheran Emphases in Confirmation

	16 th Century					17 th -18 th Centuries		Now
	Catechetical	Hierarchical	Sacramental	Traditional		Pietistic	Rationalistic	Your congregation
Instruction	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Private examination	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Public examination	✓					✓		
Confession of church's faith		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Confession of personal faith						✓	✓	
Prayer of the congregation	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Laying on of hands		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Gift of the Holy Spirit			✓			✓	✓	
Baptism complete	✓	✓		✓				
Baptism incomplete			✓			✓	✓	
Remembrance of Baptism				✓				
Renewal of baptismal covenant							✓	
Renewal of baptismal vow						✓		
Conversion experience						✓		
Admission to Holy Communion as part of rite			✓			✓	✓	
Acceptance of church discipline		✓					✓	
New privileges in church membership			✓			✓	✓	
New responsibilities in church membership							✓	
Promise to live a holy life						✓	✓	
Promise loyalty to denomination or local church							✓	
Memory verses to live by						✓		
Lifelong catechumenate	✓	✓		✓				
Other:								

(Chart copied from Frank W. Klos, *Confirmation and First Communion*, 72)

Appendix B

Can Children Properly Receive the Lord's Supper in WELS Congregations?

A White Paper Presented by the Confirmation Ministry Task Force
at the Request of WELS Commission on Youth Discipleship

Receiving the Lord's Supper is one of the highlights of any Christian's life. While we pilgrim through this life, we desire to grow more and more in our faith, and in that way, to draw closer to Christ. Certainly that happens throughout our lives, as the Holy Spirit uses the powerful Word of God to draw us closer to God every time we read or hear it. And for many of us, it was through the miracle of Baptism that the Holy Spirit first entered our hearts. But the Lord's Supper holds a unique place in our lives as Christians. Our time at the Lord's Table is the only time when our relationship with Christ takes on a visible, tangible aspect. We actually receive Christ as he gives himself to us in his very body and blood. This relationship is so close that we have come to refer to it also as "Holy Communion."

It is only natural, then, that Christians desire to receive this Sacrament often. God works in us a desire to come to his house to hear his Word and worship him. "Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked (Psalm 84:10). "I rejoiced with those who said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord'" (Psalm 122:1). When the Holy Spirit creates faith in an adult, he also creates a desire to receive the Sacrament of Baptism. "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?" (Acts 8:36). In the same way, Spirit-worked faith desires to receive the other Sacrament, the Lord's Supper. Even in our children, faith works the desire to receive the blessings the Lord gives us in his Supper. Although many of our members do not want to receive the Lord's Supper *too* often, for fear of making it less "special," even that attitude reflects a deep love (albeit somewhat misguided) for the Lord's Supper and the blessings that Christ offers us when we receive it.

However, in contrast to the sacrament of Baptism, which our Lord clearly tells us is for everyone, God makes it equally clear that the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is not for everyone. There are certain standards to be met, and if they are not, then the Lord's Supper holds not blessings, but curses. God declares that those who receive the Lord's Supper must do so "in a worthy manner." Can our children meet these standards, or does their youth make it impossible for them to receive it in a worthy manner? That will be the focus of this paper. This worthy reception is of course based not on anything that we have done or have to do, but on what God has worked in us. Approaching the Lord's Table in Spirit-wrought repentance and faith is the worthy reception of which Scripture speaks. That repentance and faith is the requirement, the standard for reception of the Lord's Supper. In a theological vacuum, this would be the only standard. But Scripture also tells us that those who receive the Lord's Supper together make a common confession of faith, that communing together is an expression of fellowship. When a group of Christians receives the Lord's Supper together, the standards of church fellowship would then be a second standard. This paper will seek to define

those standards, answering first, “Who can worthily receive the Lord’s Supper?” second, “Who can properly receive the Lord’s Supper in our Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod congregations?” and third, “Can children properly receive the Lord’s Supper in our WELS congregations?”

Worthy Reception

What constitutes worthy reception of the Lord’s Supper is an area in which, in our circles, there is no dispute. Christ said that this sacrament is to be done in remembrance of him (Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24, 25). When we receive the Lord’s Supper, we proclaim the Lord’s death (1 Corinthians 11:26). These things require that one has been instructed in the chief teachings of Scripture – the saving life, death and resurrection of Christ – and has been brought to faith in Christ. Worthy reception of the Lord’s Supper can only be done by a *disciple of Christ*.

The Lord’s Supper is pure Gospel. Jesus tells us that we receive this meal for the forgiveness of sins (Matthew 26:28). It is therefore necessary that the Law has done its work of leading the recipient to contrition (repentance in the narrow sense) before he receives this Gospel. At the same time, the Gospel must have brought the recipient to believe that Christ has forgiven his sins, that he can trust in Christ for forgiveness (repentance in the wide sense). Worthy reception of the Lord’s Supper can only be done by a *repentant* disciple of Christ.

There can be no misconception as to what the recipient is receiving in the Lord’s Supper. Jesus says, “This is my body” and “This is my blood.” “Is” can mean nothing other than “is.” Belief in the Real Presence is crucial. If a person thinks that he is eating and drinking merely bread and wine, then he is doing so to his judgment. “Anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself” (1 Corinthians 11:29). Worthy reception of the Lord’s Supper can only be done by a *repentant* disciple of Christ, who *believes in the Real Presence*.

Finally, Scripture is clear that one must examine himself before receiving the Lord’s Supper. “A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup” (1 Corinthians 11:28). Before one can receive the Lord’s Supper in a worthy manner, he must be able to evaluate his life in the mirror of God’s Word. He must be able to recognize that he has sinned, and that those sins are deserving of God’s anger and eternal punishment. He must be able to recognize that Christ paid the penalty for him, and place his trust in Christ alone for forgiveness and life. This is the mental capacity required for worthy reception of the Lord’s Supper. Some are not capable of self-examination, so they could not receive the Lord’s Supper to their benefit. Worthy reception of the Lord’s Supper can only be done by a *repentant* disciple of Christ, who is *able to examine him or herself*.

Anyone coming to the Lord’s Table who has not met these Biblical standards will be eating and drinking judgment on himself. “Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord...Anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself” (1 Corinthians 11:27, 29). Christian love urges us to avoid that wherever possible. So it is our practice to attempt to prevent anyone from this judgment, by preventing from receiving the Lord’s Supper those whom we don’t believe can do so in a worthy manner. We dare not open the communion table to everyone, because in doing, we would allow those who could not receive in a worthy manner to sin against the body of the Lord.

Scripture is plain and clear on the fact that the Lord's Supper is not for everyone. For those who cannot receive it in a worthy manner, the Lord's Supper contains judgments. But for those who can receive it in a worthy manner – who are repentant disciples of Christ, who believe in the Real Presence and who have examined themselves – the Lord's Supper gives invaluable blessings.

Reception in WELS Congregations

So far our focus has been on the so-called vertical aspect of the Lord's Supper. There is also a horizontal aspect. "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf" (1 Corinthians 10:17). Reception of the Lord's Supper among other Christians is a confession of unity of faith with those Christians. It makes the statement, "I believe what these people confess and teach." So before a person can properly receive the Lord's Supper among a group of Christians, he must be prepared to make that statement. When is that? At what point can a person confess to be united in faith with our Wisconsin Synod, so that they may receive the Lord's Supper among us? How much knowledge is required before one can make that confession? How much education is necessary before one can claim to believe what we believe and teach? Since the Lord's Supper is an expression of fellowship, this is less of a question concerning the Lord's Supper, and more of a question of fellowship. How much agreement is necessary for Christians to be in fellowship? Certainly we would answer *complete* agreement. The Scriptural "unit concept" of fellowship allows nothing else. It says that all Scripture is a unit, and that fellowship must be based on agreement on all of Scripture. But that produces the question, must every doctrine be taught before fellowship can be declared? Scripture allows no disagreement, but what must the agreement be based upon? On every single doctrine of Scripture, or only on certain ones? At what level of knowledge or education can a person make a declaration of fellowship with us, and we with them? It is not the intention of this paper to re-prove the principles of fellowship that we have taken from Scripture. It will be assumed that we are agreed on these. This paper will merely seek to answer the question, how much knowledge and information are necessary before fellowship can be declared, and how does this relate to reception of the Lord's Supper in our WELS congregations?

The easy answer would say that since fellowship must be based on complete agreement in doctrine, then a person must be educated on *every* doctrine of Scripture, *every* teaching of our Synod, and confess agreement with every one of them before we can declare fellowship. But that answer, while obvious, would seem to be extreme. One could question if this is even possible, and if it is, how long that Catechism Class would have to be. This doesn't seem to be a reasonable answer to our question, nor an accurate understanding of the "unit concept" of fellowship.¹

A more reasonable position would require a fundamental agreement. Even if not every doctrine has been taught, every teaching explained, a clear confession of faith often comes after instruction only in the essentials of the Christian faith. Although this person may not understand every teaching, he or she can confess what we confess – that Christ is our Savior from sin, and that everything in the Bible is true, since it is God's Word. At that point, acknowledging that there will still be weakness, fellowship would be declared,

¹ Nor does it match our current practice. A typical Catechism Class, while covering all the major doctrines of Scripture, does not cover every single point of doctrine. Nor does a typical Bible Information Class. If we don't insist on teaching every point of doctrine to our Catechism Classes or Bible Information Classes, then we already draw a line somewhere, at some level of instruction, that we consider sufficient to practice fellowship. Now the question is, where do we, and where should we, draw that line?

until and unless a persistent error is encountered, at which point fellowship would be broken by that persistent error.

More important than being reasonable, this position is consistent with God's Word. Scripture is very clear that our faith (understood subjectively, as our trust and belief in God's Word; *fides qua*, not *fides quae*) will not be perfect on this side of heaven. Scripture is full of admonitions for us to bear with each other's weaknesses, and to encourage and strengthen each other. "And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone" (1 Thessalonians 5:14). "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:2-3). These admonitions make little sense if any weakness or imperfection in a person's faith were to necessitate the immediate breaking of fellowship with that person. Instead of breaking fellowship, Scripture urges us to practice it more fervently, to encourage these weak brothers and sisters, patiently bearing with them (and they with us), and to break fellowship only if they persistently cling to their error.

This was also the consistent practice of Christ and the apostles. Jesus' disciples certainly had deficiencies in their understanding. Jesus repeatedly told them that they had little faith (Matthew 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; 17:20). As late as the time of Jesus' ascension, the disciples exhibited a misunderstanding of Jesus' mission. In many ways, they were like children. Yet Jesus never broke fellowship with them. Rather, he encouraged them to draw closer. In addition, he celebrated the Lord's Supper with his disciples while they still had much room for growth in their understanding. This was Paul's practice as well. The Holy Spirit directed him to write many of his letters to correct serious errors in people whom Paul nevertheless called Christian brothers and sisters. Their weaknesses and misunderstandings did not break the fellowship that they enjoyed.

This also seems to have been our understanding since our Synod's confessional beginnings. C. F. W. Walther wrote a series of 15 theses in 1868, to which both the Wisconsin and Missouri Synods agreed.² Thesis V states: "The church militant must indeed aim at and strive for complete unity of faith and doctrine, but it never will attain a higher degree of unity than a fundamental one." The same theses quickly warn against relegating any doctrines to a level of second-class, on which it would be permissible to disagree. Thesis X: "From the fact that the church militant cannot attain a higher degree of unity than a fundamental one, it does not follow that any error against the Word of God may be granted equal rights in the church with the truth, nor that it may be tolerated."³ But that having been said, the thought stands – the most the church can hope to achieve in this sinful world is a fundamental unity. Our faith will be made perfect in heaven; until then, our faith will remain imperfect, and subject to error, misunderstandings and weakness. These weaknesses, however, do not break our fellowship until and unless they lead to knowing and aware persistence to error.

A summary of the Scriptural principles of church fellowship could be expressed this way: bear with the weak; break with the persistent. When we hear a clear confession of faith in Christ, if there are no errors to which the person is persistently clinging, then we have fellowship. The only reason to break this established

² J.P. Koehler, *The History of the Wisconsin Synod*, (Sauk Rapids: Protes'tant Conference, Sentinel Printing Company, 1981) p. 129. These theses, originally published in the October 1868 edition of *Lehre und Wehre*, helped form the foundation upon which the Wisconsin and Missouri Synods built their declaration of fellowship.

³ C.F.W. Walther, "Theses on Open Questions," taken from David Jay Webber's Lutheran Theology Website, <http://www.angelfire.com/ny4/djw/lutherantheology.waltheropenques.html>.

fellowship is persistent error. If we have no reason to break fellowship, then we have no reason to withhold the Lord's Supper from anyone who can receive it in a worthy manner.

Reception by Children

"Bear with the weak; break with the persistent" matches our current practice with our adult members. Do any of us believe that 100% of our current members understand and confess the biblical teaching of the roles of man and woman? Fellowship? The Antichrist? We readily admit, albeit with sorrow, that there are members of our congregations who do not fully understand these or other teachings, and may claim to not even agree with them. Yet we do not consider these misunderstandings to be divisive of fellowship. Until and unless they persistently cling to their error, we still willingly commune these members. We do so because we are convinced that these are weak brothers and sisters, who confess the inspiration, clarity and inerrancy of Scripture, yet who have still not fully grasped these Scriptural teachings. They could well cry with the father of a boy whom Jesus healed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24). We do not immediately break fellowship with these members, but practice fellowship fervently, patiently bearing with them, and continuing to train them in the hopes that God's Word will educate and convince them.

We are comfortable patiently dealing with the weaknesses of our adult members. Should we become comfortable doing that with our children? In practice, we have already answered the question of whether we are in fellowship with our children. We would hope that all Christian parents join in prayer with their children. We pray and worship together with our grade-school age children, both our own children, and the children of our congregation. This demonstrates that we consider ourselves to be in fellowship with our children. From the moment that God creates faith through the power of Baptism, we are in fellowship with them, even though their faith is very new and immature. We continue to practice that fellowship as they grow and mature, and would only break that fellowship if they were to persist in an error. The unit concept of Scripture teaches that there are no "levels" of fellowship. The requirements for prayer fellowship are no different than the requirements for altar fellowship. If we can practice God-pleasing prayer fellowship, then we can practice God-pleasing altar fellowship, so long as the other Scriptural standards of worthiness have been met.

Do we then set the bar too high, higher than Scripture does, for reception of the Lord's Supper for our children? It is the custom in our Synod today to train our children for two to three years prior to admitting them to receive the Lord's Supper. Our Catechism Classes cover the six chief parts of the Small Catechism, the basics of Scriptural teaching. They also often contain other doctrines, more "advanced" doctrines, that we would call non-fundamental. Completion of this class is required before our children are allowed to receive the Lord's Supper. We require our children to confess to these "advanced" doctrines before we admit them to the Lord's Supper. Is that necessary? Can a person receive the Lord's Supper without knowledge of these advanced topics? There is no mention in the admission requirements in 1 Corinthians of any level of doctrinal knowledge apart from the fundamentals – sin and grace, confession and forgiveness, and the Real Presence. Since we already confess a unity of faith with our children by our practice of joining in prayer with them, are these non-fundamental doctrines necessary before a child can receive the Lord's Supper? There is nothing in Scripture which would prohibit admitting our children to the Lord's Table before these non-fundamental doctrines are taught.

The purpose of this paper is not to propose some radical new plan for reception of the Lord's Supper. Nor is it to attack the Scriptural teachings of church fellowship and close(d) communion. It is merely to raise some questions, and hopefully lay the groundwork for discussion. As the Holy Spirit inspired Paul, "Everything is permissible" – but not everything is beneficial. "Everything is permissible" – but not everything is constructive" (1 Corinthians 10:23). An adjustment of when we admit our children to receive the Lord's Supper among us may or may not be something that is beneficial and constructive. That is a judgment that each of us must make, based on our own local situation, giving close attention to both our Christian freedom and our brotherly love as we walk together as a Synod. But even if some conclude that it is not beneficial in their setting, it can't be said that it is not permissible. Some may, therefore, decide that it is beneficial in their setting. Inviting our children to receive the Lord's Supper at an earlier age, or after a shorter period of instruction, would certainly not be unprecedented. In the early years of the Reformation, the Reformers (who certainly would not have communed someone with whom they were not in fellowship) communed children as young as "eight years or less."⁴ Their practice may have differed from ours in some ways, yet it is illustrative that they did not consider a younger age alone to be enough to deny a repentant Christian the blessings of the Lord's Supper. Should we desire to commune our children at an earlier age, with the understanding that more education would follow, there is nothing in Scripture which would forbid it, and there may be much to commend it.

The Lord's Supper is one of the most magnificent blessings that God has given to his Church on earth. But it is not for everyone. Scripture declares ready to receive the Lord's Supper those who are repentant disciples of Christ, who believe the Real Presence, and who have examined themselves. Those who can properly receive the Lord's Supper in our WELS congregations are those with whom we are united in faith, with whom we have fellowship. We cannot admit to the Lord's Table those who are persistent in an erroneous confession (which would include membership in a heterodox church). But once we have a clear confession of faith in Christ, then we have fellowship, and until and unless a persistent error arises, that person can properly receive the Lord's Supper in our WELS congregations. Unless there is reason to break fellowship, then we are in fellowship with our children from the moment they are baptized. Our children can properly receive the Lord's Supper among us as soon as they can recognize the Real Presence, examine themselves, confess their sin, and trust in Christ for forgiveness, even as they continue growing in their knowledge of Scripture. As evangelical Lutherans, we are predisposed to give the gospel in as many forms as possible, to as many people as possible. We do not want to be in a position of withholding any of God's gospel gifts from anyone whom God has made ready to receive them. Certainly Scripture has defined limits on those who can receive the gospel in the Lord's Supper, but within these limits, we want to apply this gospel to as many people as possible, so that more and more people may receive the tremendous blessings Christ has to offer in his holy supper. May that always be our goal, for the glory of God, and the eternal blessing of his people.

SOLI DEO GLORIA!

⁴ *Concordia Triglotta*. Historical introduction by F. Bente, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921) p. 82.

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