

How Shall We Combat the Confirmation/Graduation Syndrome?

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On Palm Sunday, April 7, 1963, approximately seventy students from the confirmation class stood before the altar in the church and made a promise to the Lord. The words spoken by the pastor and the responses spoken by the members of the class were the same ones spoken many times in the congregations of our Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS):

Pastor: 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?

Class: I do.

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

Class: I do.

Pastor: Do you believe in God the Father?

Class: Yes, I believe in God the Father, etc.

Pastor: Do you believe in God the Son?

Class: Yes, I believe in Jesus Christ, etc.

Pastor: Do you believe in God the Holy Ghost?

Class: Yes, I believe in the Holy Ghost, etc.

Pastor: Do you desire to be a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and of this congregation?

Class: I do.

Pastor: Do you hold all the canonical books of the Bible to be the inspired Word of God, and the doctrine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, drawn from the Bible, as you have learned to know it from Luther's Small Catechism, to be the true and correct one?

Class: I do.

Pastor: Do you also, as a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, intend to continue steadfast in the confession of this Church, and suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it?

Class: I do so intend, with the help of God.

Pastor: Finally, do you intend faithfully to conform all your life to the rule of the divine Word, to be diligent in the use of the means of grace, to walk as it becometh the Gospel of Christ, and in faith, word, and deed to remain true to the Triune God, even unto death?

Class: I do so intend, by the grace of God.¹

The events leading to this confirmation day were similar to those that had preceded it. Many of the students in the class had attended Lutheran elementary school since their kindergarten days. Others had joined the class in the Lutheran school during the following years. The remaining students had been enrolled in Sunday School. For two years the members of the class had undergone weekly instruction under the guidance of the pastor. The class had been examined before the congregation. Only after all this preparation had the promises been made by the members of the class.

Four days later, on Maundy Thursday, the members of this same confirmation class came together before the Lord's altar again to join in receiving the holy body and blood of their Savior Jesus in the Lord's Supper. The writer of this paper was a member of that class. The events are still deeply etched in my mind.

In the weeks, months, and years that followed, events took place which could only be viewed as tragic in scope. I believe that first participation in the Lord's Supper was the last one for a number of the members of the class. They did not continue to make use of the means of grace which the Lord offers in His Sacrament, even though they had promised "to be diligent in the use of the means of grace." Some members of the class began to appear less often for worship. Some members of the class gradually stopped coming to church already in their high school years. By the time of the post high school years and college, there were even more who seldom if ever came to church and the Lord's Supper. Some finally made a formal break with their church membership and left the congregation or were removed from membership by action of the congregation. I know that today there are some members of that confirmation class who are active in their church membership, who come faithfully to the Lord's Supper, who send their children to Sunday School, Lutheran elementary school, and confirmation instruction. But for others the actions set into motion soon after the day of their confirmation have continued. I have no way of exactly knowing, but I fear that the majority of those who made that confirmation promise to the Lord with me have departed from it. My fear also is that many of them have departed from their faith in the Lord Jesus.

What about that confirmation promise? Our pastor did not have the ability to look into the hearts of those who made it. If he could have done so, he might have said, "You are not ready to be confirmed." The Scriptures tell us, "Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). He could only go by what he saw on the outside and what he heard. The Lord did not indicate on that confirmation day if there were those in the class who were not serious about their promise. A number of years ago, I found a tract with the title "Were Our Fingers Crossed?" It raised the question regarding those who made their confirmation vows that possibly their fingers were crossed on that day. Maybe they really didn't mean what they promised on that day.

Was this a problem unique to the large congregation from the heartland of our synod where I grew up? Hardly! A now sainted member of the congregation I serve, who if she was alive today would be about ninety years old, related to me the experiences she and her husband shared in raising their five children. The setting for their religious instruction was a then conservative Lutheran Church in the Eastern part of our country. She related a similar situation to what I had observed in my own setting. Many of the new confirmands, she said, stopped coming to church after they were confirmed. Remember, this is over fifty years ago. She talked about how she and her husband required their children to attend church with them as long as they lived under the same roof. She was proud, in her own way, of the fact that her children had continued to attend church and the Lord's Supper during this time. The story doesn't have a happy ending. After leaving home, her children did drift from their Lutheran Church and the promises which they made. Only two of the children attend church on any regular kind of basis, and these two are no longer in the fellowship of a Lutheran congregation.

What about our WELS as a whole? I am not aware of any accurate statistical study which has been done on this issue. An examination of the yearly statistical report of the congregations of our WELS does shed some light on the subject. Over the years of 1986-1990 the congregations of our synod have been receiving into membership through confirmation (youth),

adult confirmation, and profession of faith between 12,141 and 12,697 confirmed members. During this same period of time, statistics report that between 7,970 and 8,955 confirmed members joined other churches or were removed from membership. What portion of these were relatively new confirmands? I do not know. I do not believe that it would be inaccurate to say that a significant number of them were those who had at one time, possibly in the not too distant past, stood before the Lord's altar and also made a promise of faithfulness to Him.

I would like to be able to say that in my own ministry I am able to give you a much more glowing picture of "success." But I can't. There have also been those whom I instructed who seemed to have their fingers crossed. Some are seen very irregularly in church; others are seen not at all. Some have been removed from the roster of our church membership. Other pastors and congregations report similar situations. During the high school and college years, those young adults who promised faithfulness to the Lord are drifting away from church and the means of grace. Others make the exit in early adulthood following college or their experience of being on their own. It is a significant problem and should be a great concern for our congregations and each of us as Christians.

It is this problem and the solution to it which will occupy our attention in this paper. What has preceded is not merely a lengthy introduction. It is rather an identification of a problem: "How Shall We Combat The Confirmation/Graduation Syndrome?"

I. A Brief History of Confirmation

It is not the purpose of this paper to give a lengthy history of the practice of confirmation or an assessment of the current rite as we know it. That is another subject in itself. It is valuable for us to know some things about the history of confirmation and its relation to our practice.

The Scriptures are silent regarding confirmation. God's Word does not give us a command to observe confirmation. From the days of the early church, confirmation has been an important feature, and from our point of view today a valuable custom.

The history and practices of confirmation, as we know and follow them, date to the days of the early church. Philip Schaff writes of this:

"The Catechumenate or preparation for baptism was a very important institution of the early church. It dates substantially from apostolic times...As the church was set in the midst of a heathen world, and addressed herself in her missionary preaching in the first instance to the adult generation, she saw the necessity of preparing the susceptible for baptism by special instruction under teachers called "catechists," who were generally presbyters and deacons. The catechumenate preceded baptism (of adults); whereas, at a later period, after the general introduction of infant baptism, it followed. It was, on the one hand, a bulwark of the church against unworthy members; on the other, a bridge from the world to the church, a Christian novitiate, to lead beginners forward to maturity...The duration of this catechetical instruction was fixed sometimes at two years, sometimes at three, but might be shortened according to circumstances."ⁱⁱ

It was in connection with the preparations for baptism that confirmation came to have its place in the Christian Church. "Confirmation was originally closely connected with baptism, as its positive complement, and was performed by the imposition of hands, and the anointing of several parts of the body with fragrant balsam-oil, the chrism, as it was called...Confirmation or some form of solemn reception into full communion or personal profession of faith, after proper instruction, was regarded as a necessary supplement to infant baptism, and afterwards as a special sacrament."ⁱⁱⁱ

Confirmation was associated with baptism in the early years, but came more and more to be identified as a ceremony or sacrament by itself. It remained identified with baptism and the baptismal covenant. The laying on of hands, associated with confirmation, and the sacred oil came to be viewed as the means to impart the Holy Spirit. In the centuries which followed the apostolic age the church drifted into many errors. These were also to be found in what became the sacrament of confirmation. “In the medieval church confirmation with all its rites culminated in the bull “Exultate” of Eugenius IV (1431-47)”^{iv} “Opposition to confirmation was aroused by Wycliffe and the Bohemians. They replaced it with a rite which served as the foundation for evangelical confirmation.”^v

The Lutheran Reformation truly served to reshape confirmation. “Lutheran confirmation is not a continuation of confirmation as practiced in the early church, nor as it is found later in the Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches. The Lutheran tradition has only the name “confirmation” in common with these churches.”^{vi} Luther and the other reformers purged confirmation of the errors of the Roman Church. They returned it as a rite or custom of the church which does not grant God’s grace or favor. Under the reformers confirmation became a testimony of the one instructed in the truths of the Christian faith that those truths had now become a part of the confirmands belief also. Instruction in the Word became the foundation for confirmation. Only after thorough instruction, like that associated with the early church, could the one being instructed be expected to be confirmed.

Our current rite of confirmation expresses this importance of instruction in the Word. It stresses the importance of learning the meaning of the covenant entered into at Baptism. It involves the public profession of the confirmands’ faith in the Triune God. While not the view held by all within the Lutheran Church, confirmation serves to prepare the individual, through instruction in the Word, to be able to make the self-examination which Paul speaks about as necessary for coming to the Lord’s Supper (1 Corinthians 11:28).

II. Identifying the Problem

What do we mean by “The Confirmation/Graduation Syndrome?” Confirmation is not intended to be a terminal point in the lives of those who have been instructed. It is not intended to be a graduation to mark the fact that the confirmand has successfully learned all there is to know. It is not to be taken as some indication that the confirmand’s time of learning has ended. The feature that most sticks out in this writer’s mind and which will be addressed is the attitude and action that follows confirmation, specifically a departure from the Word and Sacraments and the ultimate consequences which this brings. We will also deal almost exclusively with this matter as it relates to our youth and young adults.

In view of the instruction given to prepare students for confirmation it is surprising that this departure can, in some cases, occur so quickly. The Third Commandment, as we have come to know it through Luther’s Small Catechism, declares: “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. What does this mean? We should fear and love God that we do not despise preaching and his Word, but regard it as holy, and gladly hear and learn it.” I could not begin to imagine a pastor or teacher in our churches not bringing the students in a confirmation class to fully understand the significance of those words. Yet many seem to forget this instruction. They are like those whom James describes in his epistle: “Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like” (James 1:23,24). How quickly they forget!

The problem of departures following confirmation, “The Confirmation/ Graduation Syndrome,” is very real in our WELS. Note the following:

Statistical Report on Membership

The following statistics are taken from the “Statistical Report of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod” for the stated years. They are given to show a comparison of our membership and activity during these years.

	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990
WELS					
Baptized	417,755	419,806	419,750	420,419	421,396
Communicants	317,322	318,037	317,740	317,914	317,720
Confirmands	5,895	5,378	5,316	5,513	5,209
Adult Conf.	3,156	3,419	3,496	3,707	3,705
POF	3,456	3,344	3,405	3,477	3,713
JOC & Removed	8,070	7,970	8,427	8,429	8,955

Compare the number of communicants in any of the years with the number of confirmands. The increase of communicants in the following year should reflect the significant numbers of more than 5,000 youth confirmations each year. Do we see this result? No. Admittedly, this one statistic does not and cannot tell the whole story. There are losses by death. There are losses from those who Join Other Churches (JOC) and others from those who are Removed. Among those whom are lost are those who have recently been confirmed, our young adults in high school, college, and post college years.

What are the reasons for these losses? What brings it about that those who have promised to be faithful to the Lord depart from that promise?

There is an evident answer. It is the answer for the cause of all the problems which we face—sin. It is sin and the temptations which we give ourselves to which lead us away from God. Possibly identifying those sins, the temptations which are faced, and the situations they create can help us to see this problem and the solutions which God’s Word would lead us to seek.

One problem which seems to be of significant influence is a lack of commitment. This is not a lack of commitment which begins on the part of the confirmand, but rather on the part of the home and parents. We might characterize this home and the parents as being those similar to the members of the church in Laodicea as described by Jesus in John’s Revelation, those who are lukewarm. A profile of these parents might picture them in the following way: they are one hour a week Christians; they may attend church on a weekly basis, but, more often than not, their attendance is very sporadic; attendance at the Lord’s Supper is infrequent; they have sent their children to Sunday School, though their attendance was not regular; they themselves do not come to any of the congregation’s Bible classes; apart from attendance, they participate very little in the affairs of the congregation; there are no home devotions and personal Bible study in their home. It probably is no shock to see their confirmed children have a similar attitude. In fact, it would be no surprise to see their confirmed children drift away.

A veteran pastor of our synod once related to me a confirmation sermon which he had preached. He told the members of the class that he could predict who of them would not be faithful to their confirmation promises and would not be faithful to the means of grace. He

pictured a scenario very much like the above one. He said he very much had the attention of the congregation that day.

It is no special revelation to learn that many of our households have problems. With increasing measure pastors are called upon to mediate conflicts between husbands and wives, between parents and children. The fracturing of the family has devastating spiritual results. What is the impact upon children who witness their Christian parents involved in bitter arguments? What impression do these children receive from parents who seem to show little love and forgiveness toward each other. How can we expect children to react when parents discipline their children in an inconsistent manner, and abuse them both verbally and physically? Can it be said that such children have learned the love of God from the example in their home? What about the children who must go through the divorce of their parents? Is it little wonder that the promise of their confirmation vows can come to mean so little?

Allow me to share with you four very real examples of the influence or lack of influence of parents upon their children who were confirmed. I believe they well illustrate what happens when there is a lack of parental commitment and when there are problems in the home. The names of the individuals involved have all been changed.

1. Tom came from a home of four children. His retired grandparents also lived with them. Tom's father had a good job as a supervisor in a local manufacturing plant. Tom's grandparents came to church on a fairly regular basis. His mother, who suffered a hearing impairment, came reasonably often. Tom himself was not often seen with his mother or grandparents in church. He was in church when his school class sang for worship services. Tom's father seldom if ever came to church. Tom's parents and grandparents spent a lot of time in the local taverns to the point that the family appeared to have little financial means. His father was known as a very heavy drinker. He did not participate in the church's youth group, even though it was very active. During his high school years, Tom got into a lot of trouble with the authorities. Because of the home situation the court ordered Tom to be placed in a home, in this case a home run by the Catholic Church. Tom stopped coming to the Lutheran Church.
2. Pam came from a home with three children. Her father was gone a lot at his job. Pam's family had no real church connections. Her mother felt that it was a good idea for the children to learn about God. She had sent her oldest daughter to a Lutheran Church where she was confirmed. Pam's mother thought that it would be good for her to also go to the Lutheran Church. Pam was dropped off for Sunday School but usually picked up again before the worship service started. If she stayed for the worship service, neither of her parents were with her, possibly only her younger brother. When confirmation class time came, she was enrolled. There were a number of times that she missed class because of other school or family activities. Following confirmation, Pam came to the Sunday worship services about fifty per cent of the time. Within three years of her confirmation, Pam stopped coming to church. Her brother began coming to class but never finished because there were too many other things that he was involved in.
3. Linda and Ted came from a broken home. Ted was only about two when his parents divorced, Linda about five. The children lived with their mother and saw their father each month. Their father remarried and had a child with his second wife. Linda and Ted's mother did not come to church; their father and his wife would come at times

quite faithfully followed by long periods of absence. When the children were with their father for a weekend, there was no certainty that they would be in church and Sunday School. When the time came, Linda's grandparents saw to it that she was brought to the confirmation classes. Ted had problems learning in school, probably caused by lack of supervision at home. His mother finally asked if he could be enrolled in the congregation's Lutheran school. Linda and Ted's mother did finally join the church. She came occasionally, but by this time the children's father and his wife were seldom coming to church. Their child was never in Sunday School. Following Ted's confirmation and graduation from the Lutheran School, his mother stopped coming to church. Linda and Ted continued to come on their own. Linda began working at a part time job and her attendance dropped. Ted comes to church several times during the year. Linda never was involved with the church's youth group, while Ted did attend some of the outings. The picture doesn't look very bright for the future.

4. Bill's parents were also divorced. His mother remarried. She and her husband became active in a church. They had a child of their own. Bill and his step-father were often at odds. Bill felt that his mother and step-father showed favoritism to their own child. Conflicts would become so intense, at times, that he would go to live with his father, who did not go to any church. His mother and step-father would seem to not be very understanding. They seemed unable to control Bill and give him direction. Bill refused to talk to his pastor about his problems, and only his mother would talk to the pastor. He was failing in one school, got kicked out of another school, and got kicked out of his mother and step-father's home and his father's home. He finally returned home, but was rarely again seen in church.

The above situations all point to the role of parents in the lives of their children. We should never forget that God first gave to parents the responsibility to raise their children in Him. Paul's words still apply, "Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4). And again, "Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged" (Colossians 3:20). By word and by example Christian parents are to teach their children. The home is still a tremendous influence in the lives of children. When or if that home influence conflicts with the instruction of God's Word, then children can become exasperated and discouraged. When children learn from their parents that the means of grace, Word and Sacrament, and church have a low priority in their lives, how can we expect these confirmed children to have a different priority? When children see their parents living lives that run contrary to the instruction which they are learning from God's Word, isn't it only natural for them to be confused?

If we are to expect that God's Word is to have an influence in the lives of our children, that through their confirmation instruction they will be brought to a firm conviction in their faith and with God's help remain faithful to Him and His Word, then we need to place our children under the influence of this Word. Our confidence is in the promise of God spoken through His prophet Isaiah, "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:10,11). Jesus' prayer for His disciples should be our prayer for our children in confirmation instruction, "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17). The importance of Moses' words

to the children of Israel still ring true: “These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates” (Deuteronomy 6:6-9). I fear that too many of our parents are expecting the church to do the job of raising their children and instructing them in the Word of the Lord. Yes, the church is there to assist parents in this important work. But if parents do not support this effort by their own word and example, we should little wonder that many of our young adults are suffering from “The Confirmation/Graduation Syndrome.” Parents must take to heart the Word of the Lord to them and their God given role in the spiritual lives of their children.

It was not that many years ago that the activities of a family were largely centered in the life of the church. Worship services were a family affair. The ladies aid and men’s club were attended by mother and father. The children saw mother and father reading their Bible in the evening at home. The church provided an avenue of social life for the teenagers with the youth group and its activities. More likely than not a husband or wife for the young adults was to be found within the social settings of the church. Parents encouraged their children to be active in the church groups. Since little social opportunity was provided elsewhere, the church played an important role in this area and helped to keep the young adults and parents active in God’s Word.

Today, we see a very different setting. Life seems to follow a faster pace. Mother and father spend their time away from home. There is little time for them to spend in the church organizations. Even Sunday worship is not necessarily a family affair, because the members of the family regularly have other commitments. Good means of transportation allow families to take regular weekend vacations to the great outdoors, but unfortunately vacations from the Word also. Busy schedules don’t allow parents the opportunity to sit and read their Bible. After a difficult and tiring day at work, it is so much easier to just watch television anyway. Parents talk of quality time with their children rather than quantity time. Too often the quality time is spent getting the evening meal ready, checking on the school homework for the next day, and getting the children packed off to bed. Little attention is ever paid to helping the children with their religious instruction because that’s the pastor’s job. School social life provides plenty of outlets. In the settings of the public schools it means the children will come in contact with many students and teachers who do not share their religious convictions. Outside sports programs also take priorities of time for the children and family. So little time is left in the weekly schedule that when Sunday morning rolls around it is easy to justify sleeping in for one day at least. If the family makes it to the worship service, isn’t that good enough? Can’t they do without the Sunday School classes for the younger children, the teen class for the recent confirmands, and mom and dad being absent from Bible class? The teenagers find themselves so busy with all their other activities in school and the part-time jobs so that they can afford the latest clothes, CD players, and the car that they just don’t have time for the church youth group.

As a result of these things, the influence of the church and the fellowship it provided in the past are not what they once were. This applies to those recently confirmed (teens and young adults) and adults. Where there is this lack of fellowship and peer influence, there will be other influences.

We would have to be hiding our heads in the sand to be ignorant of the worldly and ungodly influences which can and do touch the lives of our children, teenagers, young adults, and the entire family. The religion of secular humanism and evolution is pumped into the heads of children in public school. Values clarification classes (pseudo names for New Age religion)

and modern sexual education classes to teach children how to do it are increasingly popular in nearly every school district. The peers with whom our children, teenagers, and young adults interact are ever more likely to not come from church active homes. Television, movies, and popular music have become cesspools of morality. Religion and Christian conviction is belittled and ridiculed. The examples for children and teens to follow in the world of entertainment, the sports world, and the political realm more and more are seen to live lives of moral decadence and greed. The list does not stop with these.

There has been a longtime understanding that many of “The Confirmation/ Graduation Syndrome” losses occur in the college years. These losses come primarily among those young adults attending school on the campuses of state and private colleges and universities. For those who have not experienced such a setting it is difficult to imagine what these young adults regularly face. The parents of a student who attended a large state university related to me what their daughter had experienced. She, like all the other students, was required to take a humanities class in her freshman year. On the first day of classes, the professor asked the members of the class, “How many of you are Christians?” She was surprised when the majority of the members of the class raised their hands. “By the end of this semester, none of you will be,” was the response of the instructor. He spent the remaining weeks seeking to tear the Christian faith apart and to ridicule those who followed such beliefs. By the end of the semester the young lady was quite sure that she was the only Christian left. Another student came to talk to me about one of the classes she was taking on the campus of a Christian university. She had some questions about it. I asked her what the class was. When she told me it was a class on the Old Testament, I asked her to allow me to tell her what she was studying. I proceeded to spell out what she had been taught even though I had never attended her particular class. Her mouth fell open. “How did you know that?” she asked. I related that I was just quite sure she had been taught the principles of the historical-critical method with its J-E-D-P theories. In the academic realm alone the faith of our students on these campuses is constantly under attack.

Students away from home face many temptations. If they had been fortunate enough to grow up in a home where parents were not indifferent to the means of grace and where family worship was a regular feature, now on the college campus they may well be surrounded by those who do not share that practice. If there is not an active WELS campus ministry available, or a WELS church nearby, or the means of transportation readily available to the student to be able to attend church, those undesirable influences will certainly have ample opportunity to draw the student away.

In Jesus’ words, in which He restored Peter to his discipleship, following His resurrection, He told His disciple, “Feed my lambs...Feed my sheep” (John 21:15,17). “Feed my lambs...Feed my sheep.” How important those words are! The food with which the Lord feeds His lambs and sheep is the food of the gospel. How often we see those who have recently finished their confirmation instruction, in which they have been fed with the rich food of God’s truth, complete that instruction and go on a diet, a famine diet. It is the kind of diet which the Prophet Amos pictured when he said, “Not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord” (Amos 8:11). Is confirmation the end? Some people seem to think so. They do not continue to sit at the feet of Jesus as Mary did. When in their high school years these students are not being fed the Word of the Lord in regular Bible study, they are putting their spiritual lives on a diet. When they go off to college or away from home and go on a diet from God’s means of grace, then they face spiritual starvation.

III. Addressing the Problems

Are there solutions to these problems? Can the losses from “The Confirmation/Graduation Syndrome” be cut? If we would try to address these problems with only human solutions, our efforts would likely fail. Thankfully, we are not in this alone. “For us fights the Valiant One, Whom God Himself elected.” The guidance and wisdom of God’s Word sets before us the answers and the help.

Let us start with our Christian parents. We are hearing much these days in our synod about adult discipleship. Spiritual renewal has been a theme in our church body for the past several years. It is an important theme.

God established the family unit as His design. He places children within the family. He gives to parents the responsibility to lead their children to know the Lord. Instruction needs to be given not only to children but also to parents. It is through the Word that parents come to see God’s desire for them. It is the Word which produces the fruits of faith in their lives so that the light of the gospel may shine in them. When our parents themselves take to heart the instruction of God’s Word and “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,” then their godly example will also serve as testimony for their children. Consider the examples which we read about in Genesis 5. In these years before the flood, the world became an ever increasing place of wickedness. Yet, there were those like Seth, Enoch, and Lamech the father of Noah. They were examples for their children, God-fearing people in a godless world. Their children followed in their father’s footsteps. Christian parents today must be the same example for their children. When faithful attendance with the entire family at worship is practiced, children will be led by the Lord to follow this example. Parents who themselves show their joy in participation in public worship will be helping their children to react as King David did, saying, “I rejoiced with those who said to me, Let us go to the house of the Lord” (Psalm 122:1). When parents themselves make use of the opportunities to grow in the grace and wisdom of God’s Word by their own attendance at Bible class, their children, too, with God’s help, will continue to seek to grow in this Word by their continued study of it. When parents live the message of God’s Word in their homes and lives, then children will also be led by the Lord to follow and imitate this God-pleasing way of life.

Our congregations must also remember their role. In the form for Baptism currently used in the congregation which I serve there are words addressed to the congregation. The members are reminded that it is also their solemn obligation to assist these Christian parents in every way possible to raise up their child in the way of the Lord. Our congregations should rightly be concerned about the instruction of our youth to prepare them for confirmation. This concern should show itself at a young age in the child’s life. Good instruction beginning at age three is being followed in many of our congregations. Jesus told us to allow the little children to come to Him. It may be beneficial for congregations and pastors to periodically examine the scope of their education program to prepare students for confirmation. What preliminary Bible history study will they have completed? How much time will be spent in class each week? How many years will the children be expected to attend class? How much of the catechism will be covered each year? What will be the expectations for each student? Is putting in your time enough of a requirement? Must there be rigid requirements to insure that students and parents take this seriously? What other subjects/topics besides the catechism will be covered? A curriculum suggested by Professor David Kuske of our Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary may serve to greatly help congregations in this process.

What about the role of the Lutheran elementary school? I am fully convinced that full-time Christian education is one of the great spiritual blessings that can be given to our children. The school is not the only answer all by itself. Parents must support, encourage, and nurture the instruction in the home. But the school provides a wonderful means, which part-time programs cannot, to train our children. My prayer is for all our congregations to have the means for all their children to attend a Lutheran elementary school.

Confirmation must also be followed with active programs of learning and service. Our congregations must not slip into the mode of thinking that confirmation is the end. An ongoing program of instruction for the youth is vital.

The following statistics represent various selected congregations from our WELS. The congregations were chosen from various geographical locations. They represent congregations in the following districts: Arizona-California (AC), Dakota-Montana (D-M), Michigan (MI), Nebraska (NE), Minnesota (MN), Northern Wisconsin (NW), Southeastern Wisconsin (SEW), Western Wisconsin (WW), South Central (SC). The statistics present the number of baptized members in the congregation, the number of youth confirmands for the given year, and the attendance at teen Bible class.

Baptized/Confirmands/Teen Bible Class

Congregation*	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990
1. A-C	803/23/20	819/22/20	828/11/15	873/24/16	916/15/13
2. A-C	707/20/25	707/20/25	583/12/25	440/18/25	573/13/30
3. D-M	631/6/9	648/6/11	655/10/12	663/13/7	670/10/8
4. MI	1475/22/0	1485/18/0	1520/23/0	1503/32/0	1521/17/0
5. MI	1611/19/50	1606/22/47	1637/21/35	1583/22/40	1544/14/25
6. NE	477/10/10	407/6/11	387/4/7	391/4/3	397/7/8
7. MN	538/6/17	542/8/23	550/5/17	545/10/17	575/8/16
8. MN	2062/23/0	2055/27/15	2011/27/12	2024/21/15	2003/23/15
9. MN	409/11/18	398/5/26	393/8/18	388/5/20	380/3/19
10. NW	1207/21/0	1075/21/12	1102/26/5	1095/16/7	1132/18/7
11. NW	3794/61/20	3831/64/0	3865/52/0	3886/50/0	3851/56/4
12. NW	2043/30/15	2068/19/10	2094/27/20	2086/21/11	2114/28/15
13. NW	1860/30/0	1853/29/0	1765/24/0	1669/17/0	1604/18/0
14. SEW	1469/22/20	1508/19/15	1550/11/10	1628/19/6	1647/18/5
15. SEW	500/9/5	500/9/5	582/9/0	589/10/0	628/6/15
16. SEW	1040/16/12	1060/16/8	1089/15/10	1106/15/8	1131/15/0
17. SEW	1427/26/0	1387/28/0	1359/20/0	1367/16/0	1365/23/0
18. SEW	1605/16/9	1561/18/12	1520/20/0	1483/18/8	1305/12/0
19. SEW	1067/19/9	1017/11/9	1017/11/10	1025/15/9	987/9/9
20. WW	684/6/0	704/6/0	736/4/0	776/10/0	754/2/0
21. WW	4450/10/7	465/7/0	485/7/0	510/12/8	509/7/7
22. WW	1402/18/8	1376/18/9	1370/17/14	1344/27/14	1350/16/9
23. WW	1041/15/0	1083/10/0	1082/11/8	1106/10/5	1132/11/5
24. WW	1071/15/15	1012/12/20	1022/12/15	1024/18/12	1028/9/20
25. SC	177/3/7	179/3/6	185/3/4	204/4/3	215/2/4
26. SC	188/2/12	190/7/8	203/2/5	196/0/5	224/6/4

*Each congregation is identified by the district in which it is located.

Conversations with the pastors in these congregations have indicated that where there is an active Bible class and youth group for the teenagers, there will likely be less of “The Confirmation/Graduation Syndrome.” There is an importance here of continued learning. The youth group cannot merely be a social activity group. Outings are fine and beneficial. But it is the instruction in the Word which will equip and arm our youth for the battle ahead.

If a teenage Bible class and/or a church youth group is to succeed, it needs the support of parents. Parents are a vital key to encouraging their children to participate in these areas of spiritual growth.

In my own mind it is the college years that pose the greatest time of threat to our young adults. I would certainly hope that Christian parents would spend a great amount of time in helping to make the decision for the place of education. Dollars are not the only option to consider. Opportunity for continued worship and study and the means to participate in these should be of prime consideration in making that selection. For those not intending to enter the preaching or teaching ministry of our synod, Wisconsin Lutheran College offers a wonderful opportunity for a college education in a truly Christian institution.

The congregation should not forget its students who are away from home. Continued contact with the mailings of bulletins, sermons, newsletters, and devotional materials is vital. What about meetings with the students before they go off to school? Help should be given to prepare them for what they are to face. The home congregation should not forget to encourage worship attendance while the student is away from home.

IV. Conclusion

The problems of losses following confirmation are very real. We cannot afford to just ignore them. The problems caused by sin will always be with us. But so will be the help which our Lord promises us. Our Lord Jesus speaks to us in the words of John’s Revelation, saying, “Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Revelation 2:10). “Be faithful.” That is the desire we have for those who have made their vow to the Lord. “Be faithful.” This too should be our desire for our congregations and their ministry. Let us strive to faithfully carry out the work of teaching and training our parents, children, teenagers, and young adults. Let the words of the hymn be our prayer and the prayer for our youth:

I pray Thee, dear Lord Jesus, My heart to keep and train
That I Thy holy temple From youth to age remain.
Turn Thou my tho’ts forever From worldly wisdom’s lore;
If I but learn to know Thee, I shall not want for more. Amen.

ⁱ *The Lutheran Agenda*, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Missouri, p. 23-24.

ⁱⁱ *History of the Christian Church*, Philip Schaff. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan. Vol. II, p. 256-257.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 257.

^{iv} *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*. Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1960. Vol. III, p. 223.

^v *Ibid.*

^{vi} *Confirmation in the Lutheran Church*, Arthur C. Repp. Concordia Publishing House, Saint Louis, Missouri, 1964, p. 13.