



THE RITE OF CONFIRMATION

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The Shepherd Feeds His Lambs
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Is There a Better Way to Confirm?
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The question posed for the topic of the paper may be misleading. The question of a *better way to confirm* seems to direct our attention to the rite of confirmation. Yet a paper limited to the rite of confirmation would not fully serve the theme of our Spring Conference - *The Shepherd Feeds the Lambs*.

This paper is practical in nature and will set the stage with a brief historical view of the practice of confirmation, but the bulk of the content will focus on the catechetical instruction that leads up to the rite of confirmation. There will be opportunity for directed discussion at the close of this paper. You noticed that there were two handouts, the handout entitled *Living Faith* will serve as one attempt to deal with some of the challenges we face today instructing teens in a small parish setting (or the public school children in a large parish setting.)

I wonder to myself why a young pastor, who's ministry experience can be counted by using three fingers, would be addressing a group of pastor's whose years of experience uses up all fingers and many of you - every toe. I am not an education guru by any stretch, but I do love to teach. Yet, I humbly submit that I have taught only four groups of teens that I was then privileged to confirm. That is my experience thus far. The paper offered is not one of a vast storehouse of personal knowledge and experience, but one of a pastor that has been challenged to serve and feed the tender lambs that God has entrusted to His care.

A Brief History of Confirmation

It is important to see the wide variety of developments that history has brought into practice concerning confirmation. Going back to the first centuries of the church there appears to be nothing like confirmation spoken of during of the apostolic period. In the third and fourth centuries the church fathers mention the practice of the catechumens, where three years of instruction was advised and many elaborate ceremonies concerning baptism were becoming common practice.

A link between the laying on of hands and the receiving of the Holy Spirit after the ceremony of baptism, along with the anointing with oil, seems to have brought about the first mention of the word "confirmation". In the Middle ages, it appears that the theology of Thomas Aquinas served as the spring board for the Catholic church adopting a new sacrament of confirmation. This sacrament could only be done by the laying on of the bishop's hands. (Of course the scriptural basis for this sacrament came from passages that were descriptive, not prescriptive - Acts 8:14-17 & Acts 19:1-6).

Moving on to the age of orthodoxy, we see that Luther was strongly apposed to the Catholic sacrament of confirmation.

But instead of the this we seek sacraments that have been divinely instituted, and among these we see no reason for numbering confirmation. For to constitute a sacrament there must be above all things else a word of divine promise, by which faith may be exercised. But we read nowhere that Christ ever gave a promise concerning confirmation, although he laid hands on many and included the laying

on of hands among the signs in the last chapter of Mark (16:18): "they will lay their hands on the sick; and they will recover." Yet no one applied this to a sacrament, for that is not possible. ¹

In typical Luther style, he did not seek to get rid of the practice of confirmation completely, he rather wished to get rid of anything that made confirmation what it was not in practice - a sacrament. Luther was always more concerned about instruction in God's Word and the sacraments than he was about any particular rite or ceremony. Later Chemnitz's opinions helped to legitimize confirmation among Lutherans, but in the sixteenth century, there was still no uniform practice. ²

We move along in history and we see the rite of confirmation develop in the age of Pietism and Rationalism. Pietism did much to improve the education methodology of the day, but it moved the emphasis from an objective confession of faith to a subjective experience of conversion. Pietism taught that confirmation was a necessary compliment to baptism which completed the sacrament. The time of confirmation was moved to the age of 14-16 also during this time.

Next came the age of Rationalism where confirmation became even more widely practiced by Lutherans and was celebrated with white robes and family dinners. The age of the confirmand and the completion of education seemed to bring the "graduation" idea into the rite of confirmation. The vow of the confirmand, the celebration on Palm Sunday, the assigning of passages all came into practice during his period. Confirmation was standard among Lutherans by the early nineteenth century. ³

Now with a brief history of how the rite of confirmation came to be, we can bring this full circle to our practice today in the WELS. According to the *Shepherd Under Christ*,

Confirmation is a church rite in which a congregation gives its catechumens who have been instructed in Christian doctrine according to the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions an opportunity to confess their faith before the church, prays for the children with the laying one of the hands, and invites them as such who have sufficient spiritual maturity to participate in the Lord's Supper. ⁴

Luther and the Intent of the Small Catechism

Much needs to happen by way of instruction before the day of confirmation. Permit me to jump back to the sixteenth century to let our father Luther have a voice as the one who wrote the text book for our Lutheran catechesis. Luther was moved to write the Small Catechism after the *Saxon Visitations in 1528-29*. When he saw the sad state of spiritual affairs in the common churches, he was left with a sick felling in his heart .

The deplorable, miserable condition which I discovered lately when I too, was a

¹ Luther, Martin, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. LW (American Edition), vol. 36, p. 92.

² Brenner, John M. *A Brief Study of Confirmation: Historical Development, Theological Considerations, and Practical Implications*. pg. 5 & 8 (Seminary Online Essay File). This paper served as the basis for many of the quotes and historical information sited in this portion of the paper.

³ Ibid. pg. 9-10

⁴ Schuetze, Armin W.; Irwin J. Habeck, *The Shepherd under Christ*. (Milwaukee, WI: NPH, 1989), pg, 122.

visitor, has forced and urged me to prepare [publish] this Catechism, or Christian doctrine, in this small, plain, simple form. Mercy! Good God, what manifold misery I beheld! The common people, especially in the villages, have no knowledge whatsoever of Christian doctrine, and alas! many pastors are altogether incompetent to teach [so much so, that one is ashamed to speak of it]. Nevertheless, all maintain that they are Christians, have been baptized, and receive the [common] holy Sacrament. Yet they [do not understand] cannot [even] recite either the Lord's Prayer, or the Creed, or the Ten Commandments; they live like dumb brutes and irrational hogs; and yet, now that the Gospel has come, they have nicely learned to abuse all liberty like experts.⁵

Luther considered the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer to be the main parts of the Christian doctrine to be learned in memory by everyone who calls himself a Christian. He writes:

But those who are unwilling to learn it should be told that they deny Christ and are no Christians, neither should they be admitted to the Sacrament, accepted as sponsors at baptism nor exercise any part of Christian liberty, but should simply be turned back to the pope and his officials, yea, to the devil himself. Moreover, their parents and employers should refuse them food and drink, and [they would also do well if they were to] notify them the prince will drive such rude people from the country, etc. For although we cannot and should not force any one to believe, yet we should insist and urge people that they know what is right and wrong...⁶

These were also the minimum requirements that were to be taught to children from little on. Later on, there was the addition to the Small Catechism of *the Sacraments* in 1530. (*Confession* and the *Ministry of the Keys* were not written by Luther and were not part of Book of Concord in 1580). The Small Catechism and its more thorough companion the Large Catechism both have the heading, "*as the head of the family should teach them in a simple way to his household.*" Luther didn't believe it to be completely the church's job to educate the children, he created these books to empower parents to carry out their God given responsibility.

In order to bring the instruction of the young into vogue, Luther saw that the church, school, and home must cooperate. The home especially must not fail in this. Accordingly, in his admonition, he endeavored to interest the fathers and mothers in this work. He was convinced that without their vigorous cooperation he could achieve, but little... If the children were to memorize the Catechism and learn to understand it, they must be instructed and questioned individually, a task to which the Church was unequal, and for the accomplishment of which also the small number of schools was altogether inadequate. Parents, however, had the time and opportunity, too, morning, noon and evening at the table, etc. Furthermore, they had the greatest interest in the matter, the children are their flesh and blood. And they, in the first place were commanded by God to provide for the proper training of their children. The fathers and mothers, therefore, these natural and divinely appointed teachers of the children, Luther was at great pains to enlist for the urgent

⁵ Concordia Triglotta. Preface of Martin Luther to the Small Catechism, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921) p. 533

⁶ Ibid, , pg 535

work of instructing the young.⁷

Luther was following God's direction in his approach. Who can forget the words of God regarding the celebration of the festival of the Passover. *"In the days to come, when your son asks you, 'What does this mean?', say to him, 'With a mighty hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery... and it will be a sign on your hand and a symbol on your forehead that the Lord brought us out of Egypt with his mighty hand'"* (Exodus 13:14, 16). Fathers were to pass the word of the Lord on to their children. The Lord continues in Deuteronomy 11:

18 Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. 19 Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. 20 Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates, 21 so that your days and the days of your children may be many in the land that the LORD swore to give your forefathers, as many as the days that the heavens are above the earth.

And again in the writer of Psalm 78:

1 O my people, hear my teaching; listen to the words of my mouth. 2 I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter hidden things, things from of old— 3 what we have heard and known, what our fathers have told us. 4 We will not hide them from their children; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done. 5 He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which he commanded our forefathers to teach their children, 6 so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children. 7 Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds but would keep his commands.

The Church helping, aiding and equipping parents to do what God has enlisted them to do was the prime directive of Luther writing the Catechism. The church did its share in that ongoing instruction, this was a combined effort. Luther preached through the catechism four times a year and involved it in worship in any way he could. This was educating the parents to be better able to teach their children. The Catechisms - Large and Small - were invaluable tools not only for parents, but to unify teaching throughout the church.

Methodology

When Luther saw the state of the church he was called to serve, he addressed the needs of the people (and pastors for that matter) by composing a thorough treatment of Christian doctrine in a simple and understandable form. He used methods that captured interest and could be readily applied to their lives.

In awakening the student's interest on the meaning of a subject, Luther understood the value of the question. The questions and answers of the Catechism were to serve such a purpose. To teach in this way, those who give the instruction should take care to keep the questions simple and to repeat both questions and answers in

⁷ Concordia Triglotta. Historical introduction by F. Berte, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921) p. 69-70

the same terms. "For young and inexperienced people cannot be successfully instructed unless we adhere to the same text of same forms of expression," Luther wrote. "They easily become confused when the teacher at one time employs a certain form of words and expressions, and at another, apparently with a view to make improvements, adopts a different form. The result of such a course will be that all the time and labor which we have expended will be lost." In adhering to this advice has come the success of Luther's Small Catechism, as the "layman's Bible" in the Lutheran Church. ⁸

Luther was not like so many of the teachers of his day. He changed the common methodology of lecture to better reach his students at the university. He was rich in illustration and application in his lectures based on thorough exegesis, observations in life and nature and knowing the audience he was trying to reach.

In the case of children it is interesting to note Luther's views on methodology and teaching.

Luther transferred his insights on methodology to the elementary level of teaching. His practical mind led him to get away from mechanical and uninteresting methods. "Good method in teaching," he remarked, "Should note differences in character of students." The teacher must also become childlike to children. On one occasion he taught the meaning of faith and love by using two little bags with pockets. "Let no one think himself too wise, and disdain such child's play," he explained. "When Christ wished to teach men, He became a man. If we wish to teach children, we must become children. Would to God we had more of this child's play. We should then see in a short time a great treasure of Christian people, souls rich in the Scriptures and in the knowledge of God."

Such pleasurable teaching applied to all subjects. "Since young people must run and jump or have something to do which they enjoy why shouldn't that type of school be provided and such arts and skills be provided them? This is especially so since it is ordered by God's grace that children can learn with joy and play, whether it be language, other skills, or even history." ⁹

It is amazing even to read Luther today. His applications and illustrations are timeless. How can we follow our father Luther in our instruction and methodology as we continue to teach the Catechism today?

Reaching with our Teaching

If there were visitations at our churches today, I am confident that there would not be the problems that Luther found in practice and theology. But are we doing the best we can to teach and feed these tender lambs God has entrusted to us? Are we involving the parents? Are we staying fresh in our teaching or have we used the same curriculum so long that we don't have to even prepare - we can wing it and get by? I hope to address some of these questions by devoting the rest of this paper to an open discussion. There are quotes on the next pages that will help us get to know the kids that we teach and the parents that we deal with in today's world.

⁸ Koelpin, Arnold. *Luther, as Father and Teacher*. Pg. 13 (Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary - Online Essay)

⁹ *Ibid.*, pg. 13.

Fascinating facts:

Estimated in 1900, about 60% of the learners would have been hearing preferred

In 2000, only 19% are hearing preferred learners

In 2000, 46% prefer visual learning and 35% touch

Implications for our teaching?

Quotable Quotes:

“Our culture’s growing dependence on images for thinking has limited our ability to make moral decisions or even understand abstract moral concepts. When our young people are taught to speak and think primarily in the language of image and not of logical thoughts, moral principles and Christian values may sound to them like so much babbling in a different language. Living in an image-centered culture produces adults who are moved more by impression than by rational thinking.”

“The ability to sustain a logical, linear argument is developed primarily in the context of extended discourse with thinking adults. Because of their isolation from the world of adults in our educational system, teenagers seldom have opportunity to learn and practice those skills with those who actually have those skills. As a result, teenagers have learned to argue anecdotally (and to respond most energetically to anecdotal “proofs”), using fragmented images and emotional stories instead of logical argument.”

Devries, Mark. Family-Based Youth Ministry. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1994.) page 52.

Implications for our teaching?

Quotable Quotes:

“Parents are the primary Christian educators in the church, and the family is the God-ordained institution for building faith in young people and for passing faith on from one generation to the next. Over the years, this vision has been lost in a program-centered church culture in which parents find themselves on the sidelines instead of in the game, shaping their children’s faith and lives.”

Freudenburg, Ben. *The Family Friendly Church*. (Loveland CO: Group Publishing, 1998), p. 10

“Clearly, the church needs a philosophical overhaul. In my twenty-five years of ministry I worked very hard at developing a church-centered youth and children’s ministry. I said to families, ‘Bring your kids to me. Let me teach them the faith, and I’ll involve you in the process. Help me develop good Sunday schools, a great vacation Bible school, a midweek program, servant events, retreats, evangelism trips, youth-oriented worship,’ and on and on. The message I was communicating to families was that the church should be the focal point for nurturing faith in their kids. I wanted families to invest their energy in what the church was about rather than the church investing its energy in what families are about. I was sucking the life out of families for the sake of the church’s mission.”

Freudenburg, p. 28

Implications for our teaching?