

## A Reconsideration of the Continued Practice of Confirmation in the Episcopal Church

DREW NATHANIEL KEANE\*

*Many Episcopal liturgists argue for the elimination of confirmation. This essay explores the reformed rite of confirmation, the doctrine of the Book of Common Prayer (1979), and considers objections to the rite involving its relationship to the sacraments of baptism and communion. I argue that it is a nuanced application of the New Testament's teaching on baptism to a context in which infant baptism is normative. The supposed redundancy and theological untidiness of confirmation prove, in fact, to be its strength.*

After his lecture “Challenges and Possibilities in the Anglican Liturgical Future” at Sewanee on June 18, 2014, Luis Weil responded to my questions about confirmation with that now famous phrase of Urban T. Holmes: “The old understanding of Confirmation [is] theologically, historically, and psychologically untenable.”<sup>1</sup> Moeller argues there is “little basis to continue” the practice.<sup>2</sup> Holeton calls the reformed initiation pattern of infant baptism, catechesis, confirmation, and first communion “the biggest stumbling block” to those who “presently work on the renewal of initiation practices.”<sup>3</sup> Although the

---

\* Drew Nathaniel Keane is a lecturer in the Department of Writing and Linguistics at Georgia Southern University in Statesboro, Georgia. He is a member of St. John's Church in Savannah and currently serves on the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music for the Episcopal Church.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted from Leonel L. Mitchell, “Mitchell on Hatchett on Cranmer,” in J. Neil Alexander, ed., *With Ever Joyful Hearts: Essays on Liturgy and Music Honoring Marion J. Hatchett* (New York: Church Publishing, 2001), 108.

<sup>2</sup> Linda L. B. Moeller, “Confirmation: Sacramental Rite or Rite of Discipline and Politics,” in Alexander, *With Ever Joyful Hearts*, 139.

<sup>3</sup> The phrase “reformed confirmation” is Holeton's, by which he distinguishes the understanding of confirmation as a mature reaffirmation of baptismal vows accompanied by prayer and the laying on of hands for the strengthening of the Holy Spirit from Roman confirmation. David R. Holeton, “The Fifteenth Century Bohemian Origins of the Reformation Understanding of Confirmation,” in Alexander, *With Ever Joyful Hearts*, 97.

1979 Prayer Book of the Episcopal Church includes a confirmation rite, Turrell maintains that the historic Anglican practice is “alien to the present Prayer Book”<sup>4</sup> and reports, “Many liturgics scholars wish that *Prayer Book Studies 18* had ended confirmation.” He further argues that abolishing confirmation “name and thing” would bring about many “admirable effects.”<sup>5</sup> It is no exaggeration to say that many liturgists within the Episcopal Church want to eliminate confirmation.

Nevertheless, the practice persists. The continuation of the practice is often attributed to confusion and a lack of education, as reflected in Turrell’s observation: “not all parts of the church have absorbed the liturgical scholarship and pastoral teaching that was state-of-the-art twenty-seven years ago.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, support for the historic Anglican practice of confirmation throughout the many parts of the Anglican Communion may be greater than Turrell suggests—the continued need for arguments against it as well as the fierceness of some of the polemics is indicative of its persistence. Turrell argues that misunderstanding and what Holmes called a “deep emotional commitment to Confirmation”<sup>7</sup> lie behind the 2005 Theology Committee of the House of Bishops Report, “Forming Christians: Reflections on Baptism, Confirmation, and Christian Formation.” In that report, Parsley argues for the continuation of episcopal confirmation, calling it a “continuing gift to the Church . . . not a liturgical deformation of the unified rite of Baptism, but a liturgical evolution.”<sup>8</sup> Also in the report, Tanner advocates for confirmation as an unrepeatable “public rite of accountability, in which one [baptized in infancy] assumes responsibility” for her baptismal vows and receives the “quickenning power of the Spirit.”<sup>9</sup> The same persistent commitment can also be observed elsewhere in the Anglican Communion. The Church of England’s *Common Worship*, for example, conforms to the reformed

---

<sup>4</sup> James F. Turrell, “Muddying the Waters of Baptism: The Theology Committee’s Report on Baptism, Confirmation, and Christian Formation,” *Anglican Theological Review* 88, no. 3 (Summer, 2006): 343.

<sup>5</sup> Turrell, “Muddying the Waters of Baptism,” 352, 355.

<sup>6</sup> Turrell, “Muddying the Waters,” 343.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted from Turrell, “Muddying the Waters,” 345.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted from Turrell, “Muddying the Waters,” 344.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted from Turrell, “Muddying the Waters,” 345.

doctrine of confirmation expressed in the English Book of Common Prayer (1662).<sup>10</sup>

Although Moeller maintains, “Reason suggests little basis to continue confirmation as we know it,” I suspect that the extent to which confirmation persists indicates quite the opposite. Persistence and pervasiveness alone, however, do not certify rightness. I will make the case that the historic doctrine and practice of confirmation is reasonable, valuable, consistent with the doctrine of the 1979 Prayer Book, and should be maintained.<sup>11</sup>

### *Defining Confirmation*

The 1979 Catechism of the Episcopal Church describes confirmation as a “sacramental rite” (rather than a dominical sacrament) “in which we express a mature commitment to Christ, and receive strength from the Holy Spirit through prayer and the laying on of hands by a bishop.”<sup>12</sup> This definition highlights five elements of the historic Anglican doctrine. A sixth element is articulated in previous editions of the Prayer Book: “And there shall none be admitted to the Holy Communion, until such time as he be confirmed, or be ready and desirous to be confirmed.”<sup>13</sup> This rubric was not included in the 1979 Prayer Book; however, the practice of first communion following confirmation is neither forbidden nor explicitly discouraged and remains common.

Avis argues, “There is considerable continuity and consistency in the practice of initiation in the English Church from medieval times,

---

<sup>10</sup> See Paul Avis, ed., *The Journey of Christian Initiation: Theological and Pastoral Perspectives* (London: Church House Publishing, 2011), 10.

<sup>11</sup> The story of the evolution of confirmation has been explored and debated extensively by many, especially in light of the practical problem posed by the revision of rites of confirmation in the twentieth century in all the major Western denominations. J. D. C. Fisher, *Confirmation Then and Now* (London: SPCK, 1978) has become a classic work on the topic, especially among Anglicans, and continues to be widely cited. See also Aidan Kavanagh, *Confirmation: Origins and Reform* (New York: Pueblo, 1988); Robert L. Browning and Roy A. Reed, eds., *Models of Confirmation and Baptismal Affirmation: Liturgical and Educational Issues and Designs* (Birmingham, Ala.: Religious Education Press, 1995); Richard Robert Osmer, *Confirmation: Presbyterian Practices in Ecumenical Perspective* (Louisville, Ky.: Geneva Press, 1996); Theodore R. Jungkuntz, *Confirmation and the Charismata* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Publishing, 1979), 860.

<sup>13</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Pension Fund, 1928), 299.

through the Reformation to the present day.”<sup>14</sup> While the modern Western pattern began to emerge in the late Middle Ages, confirmation was still administered to baptized persons of all ages, including infants, a practice that the Reformers opposed. Holeton identifies the origin of reformed confirmation in the fifteenth-century Czech *Jednota bratrská* (The unity of the brethren). It incorporates elements from several sources, including Faustus of Riez, Pseudo-Dionysius, and Petr Chelčický.<sup>15</sup> This understanding is embodied in Cranmer’s revisions of the rite in 1549 and, more especially, 1552, which were influenced by Martin Bucer, who Johnson calls the “Father of Protestant Confirmation.” The 1552 revision of the rite responds to Bucer’s criticism of the 1549 rite by increasing the emphasis on catechesis.<sup>16</sup>

Today “among many Western Churches [there is] a . . . common understanding and practice of confirmation.”<sup>17</sup> A comparison of current confirmation rites of the Roman Catholic Church, churches in the Moravian, Lutheran, Reformed/Presbyterian, and Methodist traditions all include a reaffirmation of baptismal vows, a profession of faith, a prayer for the Holy Ghost to strengthen the candidate, accompanied by a laying on of hands by the presider; each confirmation rite typically precedes first communion.<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, despite the often-repeated joke that confirmation is a rite in search of a theology, there is a clearly identifiable Anglican doctrine of confirmation that developed in the Reformation and it is essentially consistent with the current understanding and practice of most Western churches.

### *Sacramental Status*

Western churches disagree on whether or not to classify confirmation as a sacrament. The classification depends on the definition. Certainly a sacrament is a means of grace; however, define “sacrament” thus broadly and the list of possible sacraments expands virtually

---

<sup>14</sup> Paul Avis, “Is Baptism ‘Complete Sacramental Initiation?’” in Paul Avis, ed., *The Journey of Christian Initiation: Theological and Pastoral Perspectives* (London: Church House Publishing, 2011), 11.

<sup>15</sup> Holeton, “Fifteenth Century Bohemian Origins,” 92–94.

<sup>16</sup> See Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 270–276.

<sup>17</sup> Martin Davie, “Confirmation and Christian Unity,” in Avis, *Journey of Christian Initiation*, 80.

<sup>18</sup> Davie, “Confirmation and Christian Unity,” 80–84.

without end, for the Spirit moves where she will and through unlikely vehicles (see John 3:8, for instance). Ambiguity as to the sacramental status of confirmation has been present among Anglicans from the first; Johnson notes that “among English bishops at the time of Cranmer there was not agreement on whether confirmation was to be included as one of the sacraments or not,” as indicated in the *Questionnaire of 1540*.<sup>19</sup> Historically, Anglicans and other Protestant churches have held that there are but two sacraments instituted by Christ in the Gospels as generally necessary for salvation. This understanding remains the doctrine of the Episcopal Church. The 1979 catechism teaches, “The two great sacraments given by Christ to his Church are Holy Baptism and the Holy Eucharist.”<sup>20</sup> Other rites that convey grace are identified as of a sacramental nature (that is, they convey grace) but are not necessary for salvation; neither are they ordained by Christ, but rather “evolved in the Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>21</sup> The 1979 catechism, therefore, aligns with the historic Anglican doctrine articulated in Article XXV.<sup>22</sup> Confirmation is not a dominical sacrament; rather, confirmation is a rite that developed out of the experience of the church. If it is not a dominical sacrament, then Article XX maintains the church has the authority to alter or even abolish the rite if it is found to be repugnant to the scriptures, no longer useful, or a hindrance to the gospel.<sup>23</sup> These are the questions that must guide the conversation about whether or not to continue to practice confirmation.

### *Relation to Baptism*

The central objection to confirmation concerns its relation to baptism. The 1979 baptism rite seeks to “restore,” as Mitchell explains, “those elements which we find in the New Testament and in the tradition of the early Church.”<sup>24</sup> The fourth century *Apostolic Tradition* of

---

<sup>19</sup> Johnson, *Rites of Christian Initiation*, 275.

<sup>20</sup> BCP 1979, 858. Canon IV.2 defines the doctrine of the Episcopal Church as “the basic and essential teachings of the Church and is to be found in the Canon of Holy Scripture as understood in the Apostles and Nicene Creeds and in the sacramental rites, the Ordinal and Catechism of the Book of Common Prayer.”

<sup>21</sup> BCP 1979, 860.

<sup>22</sup> BCP 1979, 872.

<sup>23</sup> BCP 1979, 871.

<sup>24</sup> Lionel L. Mitchell, “The Theology of Christian Initiation and *The Proposed Book of Common Prayer*,” *Anglican Theological Review* 60, no. 4 (Fall, 1978): 403.

Hippolytus served as a significant model. The elements Mitchell highlights here are the postbaptismal laying on of hands and anointing, out of which, in the West, a separate rite of confirmation likely evolved. He does not seem to have in mind, interestingly enough, active commitment and articulate faith on the part of the candidate, which are certainly normative for baptism in the New Testament (raising an issue to which I will return below) and ante-Nicene church.

The 1979 baptism rite begins with a rubric describing it as “full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ’s Body the Church.”<sup>25</sup> This rubric is often characterized as advancing a “new Baptismal Ecclesiology,” as Meyers explains: “Confirmation . . . is not a rite of Christian initiation, the sacrament that incorporates one into the body of Christ. Rather, it is a rite of renewal or reaffirmation, a part of Christian life rather than the sacramental completion of initiation into that life.”<sup>26</sup>

In a similar vein, Turrell explains,

The framers of the 1979 Prayer Book very intentionally restored the postbaptismal handlaying and chrismation to the baptismal rite itself and allowed a presbyter to perform them. . . . Our retention of a separate rite called “confirmation” is, in liturgical and theological terms, a confusing redundancy. This is not alleviated by the argument that the theological and liturgical inconsistencies of the present practice of confirmation constitute “the work of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>27</sup>

One might ask, however, if this “new Baptismal Ecclesiology” is in fact new? Has Anglicanism historically taught that baptism is “full initiation”?

Previous editions of the Prayer Book, down to the American 1928 version, are clear concerning the completeness and sufficiency of baptism: “Ye have brought *this Child* here to be baptized; ye have prayed that our Lord Jesus Christ would vouchsafe to receive *him*, to release *him* of *his* sins, to sanctify him with the Holy Ghost, to give

---

<sup>25</sup> BCP 1979, 298.

<sup>26</sup> Ruth Meyers, “Fresh Thoughts on Confirmation,” *Anglican Theological Review* 88, no. 3 (Summer, 2006): 323.

<sup>27</sup> Turrell, “Muddying the Waters,” 347.

him the kingdom of heaven, and everlasting life.”<sup>28</sup> So too, in the 1928 confirmation rite:

Almighty and everliving God, who hast vouchsafed to regenerate these thy servants by Water and the Holy Ghost, and hast given unto them forgiveness of all their sins: Strengthen them, we beseech thee, O Lord, with the Holy Ghost the Comforter, and daily increase in them thy manifold gifts of grace; the spirit of wisdom and understanding; the spirit of counsel and ghostly strength; the spirit of knowledge and true godliness; and fill them, O Lord, with the spirit of thy holy fear, now and for ever. *Amen.*<sup>29</sup>

Mitchell observes, “Confirmation in the 1928 Prayer Book . . . does not speak of indelible character, nor of the completion of initiation, but prayer that the candidate may ‘daily increase in thy Holy Spirit more and more.’”<sup>30</sup> Roger’s *Exposition of the Thirty-Nine Articles* (1585), frequently republished and widely regarded down through the eighteenth century as a reliable expression of Anglican doctrine, insists it is a “dangerous and very damnable doctrine” that “men cannot be perfect Christians without Popish Confirmation” or that by it “the grace of Baptism is made perfect.”<sup>31</sup> Johnson notes, “For all of the Reformers, baptism as ‘new birth in water and the Holy Spirit’ was complete in and of itself,” and yet they also recognized “the need for postbaptismal catechesis and some kind of profession of faith on the part of those baptized in infancy.”<sup>32</sup> Similarly, responding to Puritan complaints against confirmation, Whitgift wrote,

Confirmation now used in this Church is not to make Baptism perfect, but partly to try how the godfathers and godmothers have performed that which was enjoined them when the children were baptized; partly that the children

<sup>28</sup> BCP 1928, 276.

<sup>29</sup> BCP 1928, 297.

<sup>30</sup> Mitchell, “Theology of Christian Initiation,” 419.

<sup>31</sup> F. J. Taylor, “The Anglican Doctrine of Confirmation in the Sixteenth Century,” *The Churchman* 60 (1946): 6. See also Bryan D. Spinks, *Sacraments, Ceremonies and the Stuart Divines: Sacramental Theology and Liturgy in England and Scotland 1603–1662* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing, 2002), 35–36.

<sup>32</sup> Johnson, *Rites of Christian Initiation*, 272.

themselves (now being at the years of discretion and having learned what their godfathers and godmothers promised for them in Baptism) may, with their own mouth and with their own consent, openly before the church, ratify and confirm the same.<sup>33</sup>

Nevertheless, Avis points out, “baptism does not stand alone.”<sup>34</sup> Hooker and other Anglican divines (following Ambrose and Aquinas) spoke of confirmation as “perfecting” baptism, in the sense of bringing to completion what baptism began.<sup>35</sup> So it seems there is some ambiguity present in our tradition.

The ambiguity derives not from inconsistency but (at least in part) from differing senses of the words involved. For example, the 1979 catechism teaches, “The outward and visible sign in Baptism is water.”<sup>36</sup> Does postbaptismal anointing then imply the incompleteness of baptism? *Initiation* also proves more slippery than at first glance. In one sense, initiation into the life of Christ remains incomplete until the resurrection, the future reality of which baptism is a type and seal. The Roman Catholic Church defines Christian initiation as baptism, confirmation, and first communion, and it is true that until one has received the sacrament of Christ’s body and blood, there remains an essential part of Christian life into which a person has not in fact been initiated. For this reason, some have argued that baptism must immediately lead to the candidate receiving the eucharist, even in the case of infants (a question to which I will return below). In the case of infant baptism (which is the norm in the Episcopal Church), since the repentance, faith, and love of the candidate are anticipated but not present or, if they are present, then, as Calvin argued, they are so only as a “tiny spark,”<sup>37</sup> initiation into the Christian life seems partial.

---

<sup>33</sup> Taylor, “Anglican Doctrine of Confirmation,” 10.

<sup>34</sup> Paul Avis, “Baptism and the Journey of Christian Initiation,” in Lizette Larson-Miller and Walter Knowles, eds., *Drenched in Grace: Essay in Baptismal Ecclesiology Inspired by the Work and Ministry of Luis Weil* (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 58.

<sup>35</sup> Paul Avis, “Baptism and the Journey of Christian Initiation,” 55.

<sup>36</sup> *BCP* 1979, 858.

<sup>37</sup> B. A. Gerrish, *Christian Faith: Dogmatics in Outline* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 268.

*The Normativity of Infant Baptism*

Many Episcopal liturgists contrast the historic Anglican pattern of initiation to fourth century practice. Departure from some previous practice, however, may mean either deterioration or development; therefore, pointing to fourth century practice settles nothing. I do not think the restoration of a primitive ideal must be our goal. Nevertheless, if our goal is to reproduce a fourth century form of Christian initiation, then we have to face up to the difficulty of infant baptism.

While a convincing case can be made that paedobaptism began during the lifetime of the apostles, the baptism of adults following a period of catechesis was far more common for the first four centuries. Baptism meant conversion—renouncing one (way of) life in order to assume another. For this reason Barth argued against the practice of infant baptism.<sup>38</sup> Northup argues from the perspective of ritual studies: “To ritually minimize the singularly personal event of deep conversion is to rob initiation of its power.”<sup>39</sup> The transition from the normativity of adult conversion and subsequent baptism to the normativity of infant baptism altered the way in which initiation was practiced and understood.

Theologically, infant baptism involves an exception, which the catechism makes clear. The requirements for baptism are “that we renounce Satan, repent of our sins, and accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior.”<sup>40</sup> Because a baby cannot do this, a rationale is provided: “Promises are made for them by their parents and sponsors, who guarantee that the infants will be brought up within the Church, to know Christ and be able to follow him.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, the repentance and faith that are essential components of baptism are anticipated in the case of infants, and someone else assumes responsibility for helping the child meet these requirements as the capacity for them develops. This understanding lies at the root of the Pocono Statement of the House of Bishops: “For many of us infant baptism can only be defended when at a later date a person makes his own personal decision for Jesus Christ.”<sup>42</sup> Apart from this conscious faith in Christ,

---

<sup>38</sup> Gerrish, *Christian Faith*, 270.

<sup>39</sup> Lesley A. Northup, “Good Theology, Bad Ritual: What Liturgy Can Learn from Ritual Studies,” in Alexander, *With Ever Joyful Hearts*, 345.

<sup>40</sup> *BCP* 1979, 858.

<sup>41</sup> *BCP* 1979, 859.

<sup>42</sup> “Pocono Statement,” *Anglican Theological Review* 54, no. 2 (April, 1972): 119.

Schleiermacher argued, baptism is reduced to “magic.”<sup>43</sup> Schleiermacher maintained “it is only as combined with confirmation that infant baptism answers to Christ’s institution.”<sup>44</sup>

In a church where infant baptism is the norm, confirmation provides a means for recognizing the development of self-conscious faith and assuming personal responsibility. If through baptism, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are adopted and made heirs of God, co-heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:14–17), then, when babies are baptized, their situation is not dissimilar to a child who, through the death of a parent, becomes the heir of a great estate. There is no question of who the child is and what is hers. Yet, due to her youth, the estate is managed on her behalf by trustees until such time as she reaches maturity. If the trustees are wise then they will teach her how to care for the property that already belongs to her and for which she will someday assume personal responsibility. When that day does come, she will be no more or less the heir than ever before, but the trustees will officially hand over to her the responsibility to manage the estate for herself. Confirmation is a ritualization of this significant transitional moment.

### *The Strengthening of the Holy Spirit*

If confirmation were understood as only a reaffirmation of baptism, perhaps the objection to it would dissolve. Turrell, for example, concedes, “A public rite of owning one’s baptismal covenant, as the seventeenth-century Anglican divines put it, could serve a useful function.”<sup>45</sup> Reformed confirmation, however, involves more than reaffirmation alone; the catechism also teaches that candidates “receive strength from the Holy Spirit through prayer and the laying on of hands by a bishop.”<sup>46</sup>

While confirmation as a ratification of baptismal identity was not emphasized by medieval theologians—Aquinas, for example, only mentions catechesis once in relation to confirmation<sup>47</sup>—this second aspect described in the catechism provides one of the ancient threads

---

<sup>43</sup> Gerrish, *Christian Faith*, 270.

<sup>44</sup> Gerrish, *Christian Faith*, 270.

<sup>45</sup> Turrell, “Muddying the Waters,” 357.

<sup>46</sup> *BCP* 1979, 860.

<sup>47</sup> Richard Robert Osmer, *Confirmation: Presbyterian Practices in Ecumenical Perspective* (Louisville, Ky.: Geneva Press, 1996), 58.

that lends continuity between the Reformed and pre-Reformation rites.<sup>48</sup> Among the varying explanations of confirmation that arose, that offered by Faustus of Rietz in a Pentecost homily (ca. 465) became the most influential (probably due in part to its inclusion in the *Pseudo-Isidorean Decretals*): “in baptism we are born to life, in confirmation we are strengthened to fight.”<sup>49</sup>

After confirmation became a rite distinct from baptism in the West, Acts 8:14–17 and Acts 19:5–6 were (wrongly) thought to depict its apostolic origin. Because these were exceptional cases in the early expansion of the church, these particular circumstances do not provide a normative pattern. Nevertheless, these passages remain relevant to the discussion of Christian initiation, because these scriptures associate the practice of hand-laying with initiation, teaching, and manifestations of the power of the Spirit. In Acts 8, Philip travels to Samaria, where he proclaims the gospel. The people listen eagerly, witness signs of God’s power, accept Philip’s doctrine, and are baptized. Later, Peter and John come to Samaria to lay hands on the baptized because the Spirit had not been manifested among them. In Acts 19, Paul happens upon believers in Ephesus who had been disciples of John the Baptist but had not heard the gospel of Jesus Christ. The apostle preaches Christ to them, baptizes, then lays hands on them, after which the Spirit is vividly manifested in glossalia and prophecy.

While the scriptures do teach that the grace of baptism and the power of the Spirit are necessarily connected—“for by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body” (1 Cor. 12:13)—these instances in Acts (along with Acts 10:44–48, in which perspicuous manifestations of the Spirit precede baptism) also indicate that manifestations of the Spirit in the lives of the faithful, while logically tied to baptism, do not necessarily coincide with its administration. Moreover, the Acts narratives establish an expectation that the Spirit’s presence and activity produces discernible effects. The New Testament, Avis maintains, indicates “a theological, [but] not always a chronological, unity to the rite or rites of initiation.”<sup>50</sup> Rather than providing evidence of a tidy

---

<sup>48</sup> This aspect of reformed confirmation also raises questions about Holeton’s insistence that “the distinction between Roman and reformed confirmation” is theoretically clear (see Holeton, “Fifteenth Century Bohemian Origins,” 83).

<sup>49</sup> Quoted from Holeton, “Fifteenth Century Bohemian Origins,” 94.

<sup>50</sup> Avis, “Is Baptism ‘Complete Sacramental Initiation?’” 14.

sacramental theology in which a particular ritual action invariably, immediately, and manifestly imparts a particular spiritual grace, Gerrish notes “the relationship of baptism to reception of the Spirit varies.”<sup>51</sup>

I question the conclusion that praying for an additional strengthening by the Spirit in confirmation implicitly denies the spiritual efficacy of baptism. Turrell contends “there is quite literally no way” to defend the traditional idea that a gift of the Spirit is offered in confirmation without denying that baptism means full initiation.<sup>52</sup> Avis agrees with Turrell that the doctrine of confirmation as strengthening in the Spirit is “incompatible” with the doctrine that baptism is complete sacramental initiation, but, quite unlike Turrell, argues against the idea that baptism is “full initiation.”<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, the compatibility of the two doctrines has been and continues to be defended. Though criticized by both Turrell and Avis (for different reasons), Tanner makes a compelling case for the compatibility of these views, which is certainly worthy of a fair hearing.<sup>54</sup> Do the scriptures lead us to believe that receiving the Spirit must be conceived of in all-or-nothing terms? Does the Spirit only have one “gift” to impart? Seeking an additional strengthening need not imply that baptism is insufficient to its purpose any more than the gift of the Spirit prayed for in ordination does.

### *Admission to Holy Communion*

The relationship between confirmation and communion in historic Anglican practice is encapsulated in this rubric: “And there shall none be admitted to the Holy Communion, until such time as he be confirmed, or be ready and desirous to be confirmed.” Since the Reformation, Anglicans have commonly understood confirmation as preparation for first communion. This rubric was removed from the 1979 Prayer Book and the rubric that identifies baptism as complete initiation was partly intended to remove the expectation that confirmation should precede communion. The 1991 Toronto Statement of the International Anglican Liturgical Consultation discouraged this historic norm in even more explicit terms than the rubrics of the 1979 Prayer Book. Nevertheless, this pattern has persisted in

---

<sup>51</sup> Gerrish, *Christian Faith*, 262.

<sup>52</sup> Turrell, “Muddying the Waters,” 351.

<sup>53</sup> Avis, “Is Baptism ‘Complete Sacramental Initiation?’” 9.

<sup>54</sup> Kathryn Tanner, “Towards a New Theology of Confirmation,” *Anglican Theological Review* 88, no.1 (Winter, 2006): 85–94.

some places. The conflict involves four questions. First, is baptism complete Christian initiation?<sup>55</sup> Second, does the pattern of catechesis-confirmation-first communion necessarily conflict with this idea of baptism as complete initiation?<sup>56</sup> Third, does confirmation constitute a barrier between baptism and communion?<sup>57</sup> Fourth, should baptized babies be admitted to communion?<sup>58</sup>

The first question—is baptism complete initiation?<sup>59</sup>—I have discussed above. The answer hinges on definitions. To the second question—does the pattern of catechesis-confirmation-first communion conflict with this baptism as complete initiation?<sup>60</sup>—I contend that it does not.

The catechism teaches that to be admitted to communion we “should examine our lives, repent of our sins, and be in love and charity with all people.”<sup>61</sup> The exhortation elaborates on these requirements, instructing communicants to examine their lives and approach the table “with penitent hearts and living faith.”<sup>62</sup> These expectations imply the need for teaching and spiritual discipline, the intentional cultivation of a “lively faith.” Preparation for confirmation involves precisely that.

Because of these requirements, some argue the exhortation and catechism conflict with the rubric defining baptism as complete initiation. However, this reading is not necessary. Does “full initiation” imply immediate access to all that the church is and does and offers? Being within the house and being ready and desirous to enter every room are not the same. Not everything in the house is immediately accessible at the doorway. The Prayer Book teaches that baptism fully incorporates candidates into the body of Christ; it also requires that all who come to the table first examine their own lives, repent of their sins, and to be able to say in good conscience that their relationships toward their neighbors are characterized by Christ’s love. Rather than dividing the Prayer Book against itself, we should, whenever possible, prefer readings of specific passages that harmonize with each other.

The third question: Does the historic pattern place an obstacle between baptism and the table? I contend that, far from being an obstacle, confirmation provides a clear, accessible path to the table. One who has been admitted to a house for dinner enters first the foyer, then is led by the host into the room where the table is set. Along the way, the host provides the guest with all that she will need to know

---

<sup>55</sup> *BCP* 1979, 860

<sup>56</sup> *BCP* 1979, 316–317.

about the meal and other guests. As she enters the room, the host announces her, after which she assumes her rightful place at the table.

It must be noted too that the historic rubric makes confirmation the ordinary but not *necessary* prerequisite to first communion. Those who are ready and desirous to be confirmed may receive the sacrament of the Lord's Table. That is no brick wall. In the case of adult baptism, the process of conversion and catechesis leading up to baptism certainly show readiness and desire to receive. In that case, it would seem unnecessary to wait for a visit from the bishop.

Readiness is undoubtedly an elusive goal. In order to meet the Prayer Book's requirements for receiving communion for the first time, clergy, godparents, parents, and the congregation must actively encourage and look for the expression of faith in a manner appropriate to the particular candidate, her age, background, and development. The whole congregation must be responsible for each other, bearing one another's burdens, if they are really to be the body of Christ. The bar should neither be intellectual depth nor spiritual maturity, but rather, an awareness of what happened and was promised at the candidate's baptism, an acknowledgement of shortcoming and need, and sincerely expressed trust in Jesus. A shared path—a curriculum—cannot guarantee readiness, but it provides a means for ensuring a reasonable degree of instruction and support has been provided for all first-time communicants. A well-designed catechetical process seems a reasonable way to prepare for first communion, and confirmation provides a way to ritually recognize, seal, and celebrate the conclusion of this preparation.

We can rightly raise further questions regarding fairness and accessibility. We must consider, for example, what preparation means for those with differing mental abilities and challenges. Every case is unique and requires loving, spiritual discernment. Exceptions to the usual means for assessing readiness should be generous. Rubrics should not be treated as straitjackets. On the other hand, neither do I think the common pattern need be jettisoned because of the need for exceptions and flexibility.

### *Paedocommunion*

If baptism is full initiation into the church, then why do baptized babies not receive communion? The case for paedocommunion constitutes the fourth and most significant objection to the understanding

of confirmation as a path to first communion. Holeton argues that all the churches making up the Anglican Communion are “moving towards the restoration of the communion to all the baptized.”<sup>57</sup> In another place, Holeton observes, “Today, it is common to see infants and children regularly receiving communion alongside adults.”<sup>58</sup> Stuhlman notes, “In growing numbers, [many Western churches] treat even infants baptized by such a rite as communicants,” though he notes that the Roman Catholic Church continues “the late medieval pattern of infant baptism, subsequent catechesis, and a delayed culmination of ‘confirmation’ and admission to communion after this catechesis.”<sup>59</sup> The spread of the practice of infant communion presents a significant doctrinal issue for the Episcopal Church, as the practice of communing baptized infants conflicts with the teaching of the catechism and exhortation, and involves a radical rethinking of the traditional Anglican understanding of the sacraments.

As noted above, in the New Testament, the baptism and communion of adults is the norm—no explicit evidence is presented regarding when and how the children of Christian parents were ritually initiated into the body of Christ. Moreover, while the rituals of baptism and the breaking of the bread are discussed, no doctrine of the sacraments as such is provided.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, theologies of sacraments have been drawn out of the New Testament, and the faith of participants plays a vital role in all explanations of their efficacy. In other words, the scriptures disallow an understanding of the sacraments as hocus-pocus. They are not magic. The essential role of the faith of the participant is formally recognized within the Articles of Religion XXV–XXIX.<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>57</sup> David R. Holeton, “Communion of All the Baptized and Anglican Tradition,” *Anglican Theological Review* 69, no. 1 (Winter, 1987): 26.

<sup>58</sup> David R. Holeton, “Be Joyful . . . All You Little Children Are Invited to the Feast: Children at the Table in Liturgical Song,” in Larson-Miller and Knowles, *Drenched in Grace*, 101. Holeton does not specify how common the practice has become.

<sup>59</sup> Stuhlman, “New Perspectives on Christian Initiation from the Byzantine Tradition,” in Alexander, *With Ever Joyful Hearts*, 74. Stuhlman does not provide data on the first claim; neither does he reference any sources for further reading.

<sup>60</sup> See Gerrish, *Christian Faith*, 261.

<sup>61</sup> BCP 1979, 872–873.

The catechism raises the logical question, “Why then are infants baptized?”<sup>62</sup> Infant baptism is an exception for which a justification is provided. While it likely began to be practiced early,<sup>63</sup> it was not the universal practice of the first four centuries. For example, Stuhlman observes, “in the early Byzantine tradition . . . children were made catechumens at birth and underwent preliminary formation under the guidance of their parents. When they were old enough to take some part in worship, they were enrolled for baptism and underwent final catechesis.”<sup>64</sup> By and large Western churches have achieved consensus over allowing the baptism of Christian children on account of the faith of sponsors who will then teach them the faith into which they have already been initiated. A similar approach has not prevailed with regard to communion.

Since the Reformation, those who oppose infant baptism have criticized churches that practice it for inconsistency.<sup>65</sup> If babies may be baptized on account of someone else’s faith, why not commune them on the same grounds? A small minority of Anglican divines (for example, Jeremy Taylor, as well as some of the Non-Jurors) embraced such arguments and advocated for communing babies (as the Eastern churches do). This argument, however, has not proved convincing for most.

Since the Middle Ages, Western theologians have highlighted the differences between baptism and communion to explain why baptism is suitable for infants but not communion. Despite their commonality (both are means of grace in which the faith of participants is a constitutive part), baptism appears more passive—it is something done to us; we don’t baptize ourselves—while the eucharist appears more active—we must *take* and *eat*.<sup>66</sup> This explanation likely arose to supply a reason for a difference in practice that was already well established; in other words, it does not seem that this perceived passive/active difference led to the difference in practice. Nevertheless, that does

---

<sup>62</sup> BCP 1979, 858.

<sup>63</sup> See, for example, Joachim Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2004).

<sup>64</sup> Stuhlman, “New Perspectives on Christian Initiation,” 75. Given the evidence available, it is difficult to make definitive claims regarding the prevalence of this pattern.

<sup>65</sup> See Holeton, “Communion of All the Baptized.”

<sup>66</sup> Holeton, “Communion of All the Baptized,” 16.

not negate the value of the insight. The development of theology and liturgy is rightly influenced by practice and reflection.

What might happen, then, if the justification for infant baptism were extended to allow for infant communion? Would this change present any significant theological problems? Stuhlman observes that the practice of infant communion “continues to separate any process of Christian formation and apprenticeship in the faith from the initiatory process itself and to make children purely passive participants in their own initiation.”<sup>67</sup> In other words, if participation in both baptism and communion is allowed on account of a sponsor’s faith, it would appear to make “lively faith” ancillary to ritual incorporation and participation in the body of Christ. It risks reducing the sacraments to magic in which the active faith of the participant is never absolutely necessary.

Turrell chides Episcopalians for “refusing to allow their baptized children to receive communion until they ‘understand’ the sacrament or until the completion of some ersatz first communion ritual,”<sup>68</sup> but it should not be surprising that many remain resistant to infant communion, as it represents a radical shift in the Anglican understanding of the eucharist. It is not the doctrine of the Prayer Book (at least not of the catechism and exhortation). Because the proposed change involves a dominical sacrament, it is not simply a question of revising liturgy. Regularizing infant communion involves a revision of our understanding of the Lord’s Supper and the relationship between the two sacraments. Liturgists alone cannot settle the questions involved. Presently the Episcopal Church is allowing the practice to flourish, while in other places the doctrine of the Prayer Book continues to be taught. We are avoiding the difficult church-wide theological conversation and allowing a significant theological divide to grow.

### *Multiple Confirmations or Unrepeatable Rite of Passage?*

Whether or not baptized babies are admitted to communion before confirmation, in a context in which infant baptism is normative, the need for intentional postbaptismal catechesis and personal commitment remains—that is, in fact, what the baptismal sponsors promised. Such a need may be greater than ever. Even among those who

---

<sup>67</sup> Stuhlman, “New Perspectives on Christian Initiation,” 74.

<sup>68</sup> Turrell, “Muddying the Waters,” 343.

wish to abolish confirmation, there is general agreement that we must face “the persistent question of how to retain the young people who leave the church behind along with junior high,” as Northup writes with refreshing directness.<sup>69</sup> Turrell likewise argues, “Postbaptismal catechesis is a necessity, for all ages, and that catechesis is probably best done through a process like that of the catechumenate, with its emphasis on formation over education, more narrowly defined. The catechumenal process for those already baptized . . . might appropriately culminate in the rite of reaffirmation.”<sup>70</sup>

Luther famously said, “Truly Christian life is nothing else than a daily baptism.”<sup>71</sup> Echoing Luther, Stuhlman observes, “We all stand in need of continuing conversion.”<sup>72</sup> Mathes, reasoning along similar lines, considers the possibility of multiple confirmations.<sup>73</sup> Mathes argues for reimaging confirmation as an “if desired/as requested” repeatable reaffirmation. But occasional reaffirmation is something quite different than reformed confirmation. As Osmer argues, “In the emerging paradigm”—our post-Christian culture in which the majority of teens baptized as babies abandon the church—“the singular importance of confirmation should be held up, not dissolved into one more repeatable rite.”<sup>74</sup>

Confirmation provides the pivot point between having been baptized and being ready and desirous to take and eat the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper in remembrance of Christ’s death. As Osmer explains, catechesis and confirmation are located “between [infant] Baptism and the Lord’s Supper theologically, if not in practice.”<sup>75</sup> As such it is a unique, unrepeatable moment of transition. And yet, it is an always-repeated moment. As the culmination of childhood catechesis, confirmation will not be the first time the meaning of baptism will have been contemplated and affirmed. So too, as the initiation of another stage of Christian life—continuing discipleship as a person

---

<sup>69</sup> Northup, “Good Theology, Bad Ritual,” 346.

<sup>70</sup> Turrell, “Muddying the Waters,” 357.

<sup>71</sup> Martin Luther, “The Large Catechism,” in *Triglott Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. F. Bente and W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia Publishing House, 1921).

<sup>72</sup> Stuhlman, “New Perspectives on Christian Initiation,” 75.

<sup>73</sup> James R. Mathes, “A Liturgy for the Messy Middle,” in Sharon Ely Pearson, ed., *Signed, Sealed, Delivered: Theologies of Confirmation for the 21st Century* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2014), 53–62.

<sup>74</sup> Osmer, *Confirmation*, 174.

<sup>75</sup> Osmer, *Confirmation*, 174.

entering maturity and self-responsibility—it will not be the last such reaffirmation. But, it is significant moment of transition that should not be minimized.

Marriage provides a helpful analogy. The marriage ceremony is not the first or last time the couple have or will commit to each other. The process leading up to marriage involves increasing commitment and (ideally) intensive exploration of what that commitment means; while their united life after marriage will involve daily recommitment and exploration of its implications. Nevertheless, the marriage ritual is a transitional rite—an unrepeatable moment. Certainly there are those who occasionally wish to publicly renew their vows; it can be a beneficial practice. But it is not another marriage. Likewise, confirmation is a significant transition moment within the household of God, a moment that both cannot be repeated and yet is always reaffirmed, not least of all in the Daily Offices and holy communion.

A significant, unrepeatable rite of passage for baptized children is indispensable. “No amount of vicarious pledging,” Northup maintains, “can rival a personal, ritualized act of commitment in imparting significance.”<sup>76</sup> While some liturgists have argued fiercely against this conclusion, I share Northup’s insistence: “Theological tidiness should not prevent the church from playing a major role in the inevitable ritualizing of major life events.”<sup>77</sup> I would counter, however, that the “good” ritual insight need not be seen as theologically untidy; Osmer, Tanner, and others have made a strong theological case for seeing confirmation as rite of passage for Christian youth. If we do not, the post-Christian culture in which we live fills the void with rituals of identity that have nothing to do with the gospel and, oftentimes, entirely oppose it. “Confirmation,” Northup points out, “at least allows an opportunity for adult commitment and/or recognition of adolescent transition. To say, as several ritologists have, that getting a driver’s license is a ritual more fraught with significance for teenagers than any the church can offer is an indictment we ought to be hearing.”<sup>78</sup>

Likewise, Turrell allows, “the learnings available to us from the field of social psychology suggest that the public embrace of a view, position, or identity in fact strengthens the vigor with which one holds

---

<sup>76</sup> Northup, “Good Theology, Bad Ritual,” 345.

<sup>77</sup> Northup, “Good Theology, Bad Ritual,” 346.

<sup>78</sup> Northup, “Good Theology, Bad Ritual,” 345.

that view, position, or identity.”<sup>79</sup> On this basis, Northup advocates for “ditching confirmation altogether (politics be damned!) and experimenting with adult baptism in adolescence.”<sup>80</sup> His proposal here involves not only abolishing confirmation, of course, but abandoning infant baptism as well, which would mean a radical shift in our theology and practice. Such a radical shift, however, does not appear necessary, since the evolution of confirmation has already provided a rite of passage for churches that practice infant baptism. Instead of downplaying or abolishing it, we should maximize its social and psychological potential. The combination of the public assumption of responsibility with the ritual enactment (through the laying on of hands) of the reality that all the strength necessary to keep the commitments of baptism comes from God alone echoes the twin foci of baptism (a commitment assumed and a grace received). This vividly depicts Paul’s saying: “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:12–13).

### *The Role of the Bishop*

Confirmation in the Anglican tradition is an exclusively episcopal office. This requirement provides another thread of continuity with the late medieval Western rite. While throughout Anglican history there have been objections to this requirement and challenges to its implementation, nevertheless, the unique role of the bishop in administering confirmation has, by and large, been treasured by Anglicans. Turrell points out that Anglicans are alone in insisting on episcopal confirmation, suggesting that it “can only make Episcopalians appear very quaint in the eyes of our ecumenical partners.”<sup>81</sup> To borrow a phrase from Mitchell, it is “an old Anglican custom.”<sup>82</sup> While it may make us peculiar, such peculiarities also help to create a sense of group identity, uniqueness, and belonging that should not be lightly cast aside.

More importantly, there is great value in making tangible the connection between the individual Christian and the universal church, of

---

<sup>79</sup> Turrell, “Muddying the Waters,” 343.

<sup>80</sup> Northup, “Good Theology, Bad Ritual,” 345.

<sup>81</sup> Turrell, “Muddying the Waters,” 347.

<sup>82</sup> Mitchell, “Theology of Christian Initiation,” 419.

which the episcopacy is a symbol. Along with ordination, confirmation is one of the two rites in which the special ministry of bishops is summed up. While ordination is reserved only for those in whom the church discerns a particular divine calling, confirmation provides the fullest picture of the place of the bishop in the church.

The catechism describes the role of the bishop as follows: “To represent Christ and his Church, particularly as apostle, chief priest, and pastor of a diocese; to guard the faith, unity, and discipline of the whole Church.”<sup>83</sup> Without episcopal confirmation, many Episcopalians might never meet a bishop (much less, *their* bishop) at all, rendering the pastoral function of the episcopacy entirely indirect (at best). While the pastoral role of the bishop is to a large extent delegated to the presbyterate, the responsibility to meet, touch, and pray for every baptized person in his or her diocese provides a safeguard against the notion that caring for the flock is a lesser task that should entirely be delegated away.

Confirmation epitomizes the office of the bishop not only as shepherd, but also as guardian of the doctrine and good order of the church. It offers a means (whether effectively realized or not) for the bishop to ensure that baptized children are catechized. Whether or not that catechesis has been well done is another question. It is undeniable that Christian formation stands in need of robust improvement. We have an urgent need for serious work around catechesis so that the children baptized in our churches “may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge” (Eph. 3:18–19).

### *Conclusion*

Mitchell famously described confirmation as “one of the problems left unresolved in the Book of Common Prayer 1979.”<sup>84</sup> Far from being a problem, I maintain that the historic Anglican doctrine of confirmation, which may still be found in the pages of the current Prayer Book, is not only reasonable but also valuable. While partly the result of historical accident, the pattern of initiation that emerged

---

<sup>83</sup> BCP 1979, 855

<sup>84</sup> Lee Alison Crawford, “A Rite in Search for a Reason of Being,” in Pearson, *Signed, Sealed, Delivered*, 67.

in the West provides a subtle and nuanced way to apply the fullness of the New Testament's teaching on baptism to a context in which infant baptism is normative. The supposed redundancy and theological untidiness of confirmation proves, in fact, to be its strength.<sup>85</sup> The persistence of the practice, rather than resulting from stubbornness or ignorance, may be indicative of that subtlety and strength.

---

<sup>85</sup> I must acknowledge and thank Gavin Dunbar for this insight. He makes a similar point regarding the structure and language of Cranmer's second communion liturgy in "Like Eagles in This Life: A Theological Reflection on 'The Order for the Administration of the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion' in the Prayer Books of 1559 and 1662," in Prudence Dailey, ed., *The Book of Common Prayer: Past, Present, and Future; A 350th Anniversary Celebration* (London: Continuum International Publishing: 2011), 85–106.