

Confirmation

FOR almost a century now, the restored use of the term, Confirmation, has been met within Scottish Presbyterianism. The fourth edition (1877) of the Church Service Society's *Euchologion* or Book of Common Order, contained an "Order for the Admission of Catechumens to the *Confirmation* of the Baptismal Vow, and to the Participation of the Lord's Supper." The term, Confirmation, appears in *Prayers for Divine Service* (1929) issued by the pre-Union Church of Scotland, though not in the *Book of Common Order* 1928, issued by the pre-Union United Free Church of Scotland. To-day, the *Book of Common Order* of the Church of Scotland, published in 1940 by Authority of the General Assembly, gives an "Order for the Confirmation of Baptized Persons and for their Admission to the Lord's Supper".

But there seems to be a want of clarity in regard to the meaning of this term, Confirmation. For the most part the word is employed in the sense of ratification. The principal reference is to the believer's ratification or confirmation of his baptismal vow in a public profession of faith, a very vital matter in the Church's life, but not necessarily the original reference in the Church's use of this word, Confirmation. Confirmation, in its Greek form, *Bebaiosis*, means "strengthening", and should refer primarily to the operation of the Holy Spirit in confirming or strengthening a believer's faith, rather than to a human response or act of dedication in a public profession of faith.

"Whether or not our service of admission is the same act which in other Communion is called Confirmation is a question on which the Church seems to have made no decision", writes Dr Wilson Baird⁽¹⁾. "But there will be general agreement that the service *is* the Confirmation or completion of Baptism, and that in it the candidates do receive, in answer to the prayers of the Church, a special blessing of the Holy Spirit". Current theological and liturgical thinking suggests that the time has come for the Church to examine more closely this confusion of thought in regard to Confirmation; and to move towards a decision

⁽¹⁾ *The Minister's Manual* (Church of Scotland, 1947), p. 104.

about what the Church intends to do in this rite of Confirmation.

Scriptural Sources

The origin of this rite is found in the Apostolic laying on of hands on baptized persons, in token that the Holy Spirit was imparted to them. This practice appears in the early Palestinian Church. "Now when the apostles which were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent unto them Peter and John: who, when they were come down, prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Ghost; (for as yet he was fallen upon none of them: only they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.) Then laid they their hands on them, and they received the Holy Ghost". (*Acts* 8, v. 14-17). Again when St. Paul found in Ephesus these disciples, already initiated through John's baptism of repentance, who had "not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost", he preached the fullness of the Christian Gospel to them; and then "they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands upon them the Holy Ghost came on them, and they spake with tongues and prophesied" (see *Acts* 19, v. 1-6). These two scriptural references suggest that in the Early Church, separate from the Sacrament of Baptism, there was an ordinance in which the laying-on of hands was used to symbolize the imparting of the Holy Spirit, an ordinance of confirmation or strengthening by the Holy Spirit.

There can be no dogmatic certainty whether St. Paul's injunction, "lay hands suddenly on no man" (*I. Timothy*, 5, v. 22) refers to ordination to the holy ministry, the usually accepted reference, or to confirmation, which is quite a reasonable possibility. The writer to the Hebrews seems to regard the "laying-on of hands" as one element along with repentance and baptism in the process of initiation into the faith from which apostasy is unthinkable (see *Hebrews* 6, v. 1-2).

Such is the sum total of Scriptural evidence for any rite in the nature of Confirmation. But even from these instances we can accept the following as a correct definition of Confirmation. "Confirmation is that which with express sign and with appropriate words may be done by the Church as part of the administration of Baptism or in sequence to that Sacrament, in witness to and in view of the dependence of the baptized upon the Holy Spirit for grace and strength

to bring forth the fruit of their union with Christ and in order to their endowment with spiritual gifts for Christ's service ".(1).

Confirmation in the Sub-Apostolic and Medieval Church

The early establishment of Infant Baptism in the Church might have led us to expect an early emphasis on the separate rite of Confirmation, but between the few Scriptural references and the end of the second Christian century, there is no information about this ordinance. *The Didache*, unfortunately, has nothing to say here. But writing between 190 and 210, A.D., Tertullian refers to a definite rite of confirmation. He describes how, on issuing from the font, the baptized were "anointed with a blessed unction", and "in the next place the hand is laid on us invoking and inviting the Holy Spirit through benediction"(2). By Tertullian's time this rite of laying-on of hands to the strengthening of the baptized through the Spirit was already universally practised, and the simple Apostolic rite was beginning to be elaborated with the addition of anointing with oil.

The process had begun which was to elevate Confirmation into one of the five lesser sacraments. In Eastern or Greek practice the rite was elaborated not only by the addition of unction or anointing with oil (*χρυσμα*), but by the inclusion of the Seal or signing of the Cross on the believer's forehead (*σφραγισ*).

In the ninth century, there was cleavage between the Eastern and Western Churches in regard to unction or chrism. Pope Nicholas I. in the West held that only bishops could be permitted to anoint in confirmation, while Photius, Patriarch of Constantinople, in the East, held that this anointing belonged to the presbyter's office as well.

The Medieval Roman Church established Confirmation as a Sacrament. Arguing for the necessity of seven sacraments, St. Thomas Aquinas taught that "in Baptism is the birth to spiritual life; advance to mature strength is through Confirmation; the nourishing of this inward life is through the Eucharist"(3). This position became hardened in the decrees of the Council of Trent (1545-7), where confirmation is declared to be one of the seven

(1) H. J. Wotherspoon: *Religious Values in the Sacraments* (Croall Lectures, 1926-27).

(2) *De Baptismo*.

(3) G. P. Fisher: *History of Christian Doctrine*.

sacraments, all instituted by Christ and all necessary to salvation.

By the sixteenth century, confirmation was universally practised in the Christian Church, but the mind of the Church was not clear in regard to many points. Should the symbol used be the simple laying-on of hands or should the rite include unction or chrism? Should confirmation take place at the time of baptism, the present-day Eastern practice, or at a later, more developed stage in the baptized's life, the Western practice? Could a presbyter or priest confirm or only a bishop standing in the so-called apostolic succession? Was this rite a Sacrament or only a valuable declaratory ordinance? All these questions were to face the Churches of the Reformation.

In the New Testament Church, confirmation had arisen as a further witness to the sovereignty of grace. Baptism was an act of God, early administered to infants in token that they were heirs of the covenant of grace. Confirmation was also an act of God, in token of the strengthening of believers by His Spirit, and marking the growth from unconscious faith to understanding. It was to prove all too easy to give the false suggestion that baptism was in some way an incomplete rite. In what terms could confirmation be set forth as the *complement* of baptism? In so far as confirmation seemed to belittle baptism it was an embarrassment to the Church, but it could be of deep spiritual value in stressing the absoluteness of grace and the givenness of salvation.

The Churches of the Reformation would have to reconsider Confirmation "as an invocation of the Holy Spirit to establish His work in Baptism, to increase grace according to need, and to include the baptized person in the dividing of His gifts" (1).

Confirmation after the Reformation

The new departure in regard to Confirmation made by the Churches of the Reformation was to connect this ordinance more definitely with the catechizing of young persons and their preparation for making a public profession of faith and coming to the Lord's Table. This new emphasis on the baptized's personal ratification (confirmation!) of the baptismal vows made vicariously in infancy was a very profound insight into the nature of the Christian life and the Church. The Reformation insistence on a personal

(1) H. J. Wotherspoon: *op. cit.*

profession of faith by the baptized is something of permanent validity for the Church. But this novel and profound insight did not deal with the question of Confirmation in its original sense.

Confirmation proper was retained in the Anglican tradition. In the *First Prayer Book of King Edward the Sixth* (1549), the order was kept quite distinct from the catechizing. The rubric directed the bishop to cross the candidates in the forehead and to lay his hand upon their head. The Collect ran—

Sign them, O Lord, and mark them to be thine for ever, by the virtue of thy holy cross and passion. Confirm and strengthen them with the inward unction of thy Holy Ghost, mercifully unto everlasting life. Amen.

and the declaratory words followed—

I sign thee with the sign of the cross, and lay my hand upon thee :
In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.
Amen.

In what became the established Anglican form, “The Order of Confirmation, or Laying-on of hands upon those that are baptized and come to years of discretion”⁽¹⁾, the profession of faith based on the catechism and the actual confirmation are more closely and definitely linked. The rubric directs the bishop to “lay his hand upon the head of everyone severally”, saying,

Defend, O Lord, this thy child with thy heavenly grace, that he may continue thine for ever; and daily increase in thy Holy Spirit, more and more, until he come unto thy everlasting kingdom. Amen.

The Lutheran tradition continued a definite rite of Confirmation, but the Reformed tradition was much more undecided. It was natural for the Reformation emphasis on catechism and personal profession to appeal to John Calvin, who did, however, consider Confirmation. “The infants”, he writes, “who had been initiated by baptism, not having then given a confession of faith to the Church, were again, toward the end of their boyhood, or on adolescence, brought forward by their parents, and were examined by the bishop in terms of the catechism which was then in common use. In order that this act, which otherwise justly required to be grave and holy, might have more reverence and dignity, the ceremony of laying-on of hands was also used. Thus the boy, on his faith being approved, was dismissed with a solemn blessing I wish we

⁽¹⁾ *The Book of Common Prayer, 1661-2 and 1886.*

could retain the custom, which, as I have observed, existed in the early Church, before this abortive mask of a sacrament appeared "(1). Thus, although Calvin commends the laying on of hands in benediction, he does not examine very closely the actual nature of Confirmation, and his main interest remains in the public profession of faith.

Confirmation in the Church of Scotland

There is no mention of Confirmation or any similar ordinance in John Knox's *Service Book*; and the later Presbyterian directives, including the *Directory for the Publick Worship of God* (1645), have nothing to say about Confirmation or even Preparation for Admission to the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. We may be inclined to ask: "how is it that a practice (if one may not assume that it is an ordinance) primitive, Scripturally suggested, in one form or another universally recognised for at least thirteen centuries, rationally demanded, practically of intense value, retained by Anglicanism and Lutheranism, came to be disused by most of the Reformed and in particular by the Church of Scotland which certainly aimed to conserve the really Catholic?" (2).

It was probably a revulsion against the over-elaboration of this rite which led to its disuse in most of the Reformed Churches. Calvin's treatment of the subject is largely a negative and unedifying tirade against unction with oil!(3). Moreover, for the first two centuries of Scottish Presbyterianism, the recognised solemn spiritual responsibilities of the heads of households, the common practice of family worship and the universal teaching of the Shorter Catechism, ensured a high degree of preparation for admission to Holy Communion, which can no longer be taken for granted.

The Church to-day has awakened to the need for better teaching and catechizing if the public profession of faith is to maintain its position of honour and reality in our Communion(4). This profound Reformation insight is something of permanent value to be contributed to the life of the Church Catholic. The Ordinance of Confirmation should be closely linked to such thorough preparation for and admission to the Eucharist.

(1) Calvin: *Institutes*, Book IV. Chapt. XIX., sec. 4-13.

(2) H. J. Wotherspoon: *op. cit.*

(3) Calvin: *loc. cit.*

(4) See Report of Special Committee anent the Administration of Baptism and anent The Preparation of Candidates for Communion (General Assembly Reports, 1950).

But the whole emphasis at this solemn moment in the baptized believer's life should not be on his own human approach or effort. To practise Confirmation proper would rightly emphasize the work of the Holy Spirit in strengthening the candidate. Surely Confirmation in its God-ward reference will appeal to all nurtured in the Calvinist tradition of the sovereignty of grace. The ratification or confirmation of baptismal vows by the candidate is of great moment, but the strengthening or confirmation of the candidate's soul by the Holy Spirit of God matters more. The form of service now authorized in the Church of Scotland is capable of this use, emphasis and interpretation.

Confirmation To-day

The Church must clarify its mind about the relation of Confirmation to Baptism. The Holy Spirit is truly operative in both. In the Sacrament of Baptism the Holy Spirit incorporates the believer in the Body of Christ and sets upon him the seal of forgiveness and redemption. That Sacrament is complete and once for all, but has its complement and fulfilment in Confirmation, wherein the Holy Spirit strengthens and commissions the baptized for the full Christian life of work and witness.

Confirmation has been likened to a kind of "ordination of the laity", a rite parallel to that in which a baptized believer called to the holy ministry receives an endowment of the Holy Spirit at his ordination. In both confirmation and ordination the same symbol of laying-on of hands tokens the imparting of the Spirit. Those who receive this "ordination of the laity" in confirmation are "set apart for a lifelong vocation and ministry By this solemn rite, the members of the priestly Body of the Great High Priest are consecrated by the Holy Spirit, so that strengthened by the increase of His manifold gifts of grace they may be enabled faithfully to fulfil their ministry of worship and service"(1).

Again, Baptism is the declaration of Justification. To say so is not to adopt an *ex opere operato* view of baptismal generation, for even as a declaratory act, Baptism is concerned with Justification. Now, it will be readily admitted that traditional Protestant Orthodoxy has tended to be preoccupied with Justification, and to give too little attention to Sanctification. One deeply evangelical value in the rite

(1) *Confirmation To-day* (Joint Committees of the Convocations of Canterbury and York, 1944).

of Confirmation is its witness to Sanctification or growth in the spiritual life. Confirmation is declaratory of what follows baptism in the life of the Spirit. It bears witness to the distribution of the gifts of the Spirit among believers. The Church of the twentieth century suffers from nothing more than a neglect of the doctrine of the Spirit and an impoverished experience of the Spirit; the restoration of Confirmation can be a most useful witness of the Holy Spirit in the Church, and may lead to rich fruits in Sanctification among believers.

The need in our Scottish Church is to achieve such witness and positive teaching through a wider use of the excellent Confirmation Service in our *Book of Common Order*. A General Assembly report states: "The Committee stresses the importance of the Service for the Confirmation of Baptized Persons, and suggests that, as a rule, it should be held on the morning of the Sunday of the week preceding a celebration of the Lord's Supper" (1).

This order of service has three elements or three religious moments, each of which deserves due and proper emphasis.

1. In the *Public Profession of Faith* made by the candidate, he ratifies the vows of baptism and undertakes with the help of God, to live a Christian life and to be an active, faithful and generous churchman. The solemn and binding nature of these vows has to be emphasized. This solemn profession of the faith before the Church is one of the deepest insights of Reformation thought.

2. The *Confirmation* proper follows, commencing with a prayer for the gifts of the Spirit to be granted to the candidates. The Minister is directed to "raise his hand in blessing over the candidates, or to lay his hand on the head of each as they kneel", but surely the latter Scriptural symbol will always be preferred to the former, vague action. The words of Confirmation are both clear and noble:

The God of all grace, who hath called you to His eternal glory, confirm you to the end, that you may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

But if the words of the Anglican Confirmation Prayer are to be included in the service, they should be spoken as a complete collect at this point, and not be loosely incorporated in the general prayer at the end of the service: "Defend, O Lord, this thy child" (see above).

3. The *Admission to the Lord's Table* "in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, the great King and Head of the

(1) Assembly Report already quoted.

Church" is the third great moment in this rite. It is important that the right hand of fellowship should be given at this point to add solemnity to this admission. At least some members of the kirk session should be associated with the minister in giving the right hand of fellowship at the service, to give expression to the spiritual function and office of the kirk session, and to keep in mind that the minister is functioning as the representative of and within the life of the whole Body of Christ.

Our Church of Scotland Confirmation Service thus practised and interpreted is worthy alike of our Catholic and Reformed inheritances, and is full of spiritual power and evangelical relevance.

It is interesting that the combined Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregationalist liturgical experience of the Church of South India, should be leading them to a practice and rite very similar to our own. Their recently authorized "Order of Service for the Reception of Baptized Persons into the Full Membership of the Church commonly called Confirmation"⁽¹⁾ contains an Introduction (with an alternative), then "The Vows", "The Confirmation", and "The Reception". The Foreword makes this significant statement :

This service has a threefold purpose : 1. The personal acceptance by the candidate of God's promises, and his personal dedication of himself to Christ as his Lord and Saviour. 2. Prayer that God may increase in the candidate the gift of his Holy Spirit, by whom he makes us his own unto the day of redemption and empowers us for the life in Christ. 3. The reception of the candidate by the congregation into the full fellowship of the Church, including especially the fellowship of the Lord's Table. The three elements in this purpose should be regarded as inseparable.

I believe that the revival and restoration of the rite of Confirmation in many churches to-day is a sign of inward spiritual renewal, and that the rite itself can exercise great spiritual power within our fellowship.

R. STUART LOUDEN.

⁽¹⁾ Published for the Church of South India by the Oxford University Press : October, 1950.