

The Role of Confirmation in Christian Initiation

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Abstract

The relation between baptism, chrismation, and first communion has developed differently in different denominations. An important characteristic of this development is the establishment of confirmation as a separate rite during medieval times. Despite Luther's being skeptical toward confirmation, which he considered a human invention with Semipelagian connotations, it was adopted for catechetical purposes by Martin Bucer, partly as a compromising gesture toward the Anabaptists. Today, confirmation is a well-established rite of passage with a theologically complicated history administered within a context where a new awareness of the rites of initiation in the early church has opened old debates concerning chrismation, confirmation, and the communion of infants. The article investigates how a knowledge of this history can help us develop an ecumenically relevant theology of confirmation and catechesis carried by a strong understanding of baptism as the undisputed rite of Christian initiation.

Keywords

Christian initiation – chrismation – confirmation – infant communion – liturgical history – ecumenism

1 The Problem

When Christ rose from death, he instructed his disciples to proclaim the gospel of forgiveness for all peoples (Luke 24:47–48). Through this proclamation there was created a fellowship of followers baptized in the name of the triune God, taught the commandments as interpreted by Jesus (Matt 28:19–20) and

nourished by the meal Jesus had instituted the evening before he died (Matt 26:26–29). For this reason, baptism, instruction, and Eucharist have remained essential elements in all Christian communities.

However, the relation between these elements has become controversial, and this is in no small degree due to the addition of a fourth element, confirmation. Some see baptism, confirmation, and first communion as different elements in a unified rite through which one becomes a part of the Christian church. Others consider confirmation a separate rite which may or may not be considered a condition for becoming a fully accepted member of the church in the sense that one is invited to take part in the celebration of the Eucharist. Among those who see confirmation as a separate rite some see it as a sacrament, while others consider it a combination of intercessory prayer and graduation ceremony after a period of instruction.

What are the reasons for this rather complicated situation, and may a better understanding of these reasons benefit our present work with confirmation and youth ministry? The ecumenical movement has taught us to expect theological enrichment from being acquainted with traditions from other denominations than our own. Does this apply to confirmation as well? I write this as a theologian working in a Lutheran context, but hopefully in a way that will be of interest also for those with other church affiliations.

I will investigate these questions by first giving an overview of the history of the rite through which one becomes a part of the Christian church, i.e., the rite of Christian initiation, with a particular emphasis on the background for and understanding of confirmation (parts 2 to 5). In a next step (part 6), I will use this overview as the starting point for the development of a historically informed and ecumenically relevant understanding of confirmation. How could we today develop and maintain traditions of initiation, instruction, and confirmation in ways that are informed both by the New Testament, church history, and our own cultural and ecclesial context?

2 Initiation in the Early Church

The New Testament does not give us a liturgy of baptism, and neither do the earliest non-biblical sources. However, it seems that initiation into the Christian fellowship originally was a rite of baptism with water, anointing with oil (chrismation) and the first celebration of the Eucharist.¹ The anointing

¹ “Most of the [pre-Nicene] documents yield a ritual pattern of initiation with anointing and water”; so Bryan D. Spinks, *Early and Medieval Rituals and Theologies of Baptism: From the*

was associated with the gift of the Holy Spirit and may be related to the New Testament idea of Christians being anointed and sealed by the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 1:22; Eph 1:13; 1 John 2:20). Still, one does not seem to have differentiated as sharply between baptism and the gift of the Spirit as the stories in Acts 8:14–17, 10:44–48, and 19:6 may suggest.² The baptism of Christians was patterned after the baptism of Jesus who on that occasion was not anointed. Still, ‘Christ’ means ‘the Anointed One’, and it therefore makes sense to be united with Christ (cf. Rom 6:5) through baptism and chrismation.³ The anointing took place before or after baptism, or both.⁴

Before the candidates could receive the threefold rite of initiation was a period of instruction. In this way, they were introduced to the life as a disciple of Christ that was to continue after one had been accepted into the Christian community. At the early stage, there does not seem to have been a fixed date for either instruction or baptism. However, from the 4th century, the period of Lent became the period of preparation and Easter the day of initiation into the community.⁵ The period of preparation allowed for a substantial amount of instruction.⁶ However, children of Christian parents were baptized seemingly without discussion, and when Cyprian of Carthage in the 3rd century found it necessary to defend this tradition, he did it by maintaining that if baptism could give forgiveness to notorious sinners, one should not exclude children who have done nothing wrong but “being born of the flesh according to Adam.” Cyprian is also the oldest witness of baptized infants receiving communion at the end of the baptismal rite.⁷

New Testament to the Council of Trent, Liturgy, Worship and Society (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 35. The oldest source for infants receiving communion as part of the baptismal rite is from the 3rd century, but it seems to reflect what by then was a well-established tradition which continued undisputed until well into medieval times; see Ruth A Meyers, ‘Infant Communion: Reflections on the Case from Tradition’, *Anglican and Episcopal History* 57 (1988): 159–75.

2 Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation* (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Pr; Pueblo, 1999), 23–24.

3 Johnson, 47.

4 Johnson, 112, 192–93, 198; Paul Turner, ‘Confirmation’, in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, ed. Berard L. Marthaler (Washington D.C.: Thomson Gale, 2003), 3,84–92; Spinks, *Early and Medieval Rituals*, 35; Jiménez, O., ‘Initiation, Christian’, in *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity*, vol. 2 (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014), 333.

5 Johnson, *Christian Initiation*, 159–76; O. Pasquato, ‘Catechumenate – Discipleship’, in *Encyclopaedia of Ancient Christianity*, vol. 1 (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014), 457–71.

6 Johnson, *Christian Initiation*, 90–92.

7 Meyers, ‘Infant Communion’, 160; Johnson, *Christian Initiation*, 67–68.

Augustine (354–420) focused more narrowly on water as the sign of baptism and has for that reason been criticized for introducing a kind a sacramental minimalism. Still, Augustine himself maintained the tradition of considering baptism, anointing and first communion a unified rite.⁸ However, from about this time the church in Rome started to consider postbaptismal anointing a privilege for the bishop, and for that reason a certain time could elapse between baptism and anointing.⁹ It has been suggested that the origin of this tradition was a rite of dismissal where the bishop sent the newly baptized from their baptism to the congregation where they were to receive their first communion.¹⁰ If this is correct, episcopal anointing differs from pre- or postbaptismal anointing as commonly practiced in the early church by not being a part of the liturgy of baptism; it should rather be seen as a rite in its own right.¹¹ Be that as it may, in 416 Pope Innocent I wrote a letter where he insists that no one but the bishop should perform “the signing of the newly baptized.” As a biblical argument for this practice, he refers to the story in Acts 8, according to which the apostles Peter and John are sent to give the Spirit to those who were baptized. Postbaptismal anointing may be done by the priest, but he is not allowed to “sign the forehead with the same oil” – this is the privilege of the bishop.¹²

This is the first document that explicitly connects the gift of the Holy Spirit with a postbaptismal episcopal signing and should for that reason be considered the origin of confirmation as a separate rite.¹³ When it was written, it may have reflected more of the ideal of its author than reality, and for a long time, priests seem to have continued doing everything including postbaptismal anointing even in Rome.¹⁴ Decisive for the medieval West was, however, that the Carolingian reform adopted the example of Rome including the ideal of a postbaptismal, episcopal blessing,¹⁵ thus confirming an understanding of confirmation as a rite that took place at a later time than baptism. Neither the papal letter from the 5th century nor the Carolingian reform from the 9th carried any weight in the European East, though. The Orthodox Church has therefore kept

8 Johnson, *Christian Initiation*, 155–56; Spinks, *Early and Medieval Rituals*, 64.

9 Jerome (342–420), who is one of the early sources for this practice, did not like it, but considered it an attempt to strengthen the authority of bishops (Johnson, 126).

10 Aidan Kavanagh, ‘Confirmation: A Suggestion from Structure’, *Worship* 58 (1984): 386–95.

11 This is the position adopted by Turner, ‘Confirmation’, who finds the essence of confirmation in its always having been performed by the bishop. Daniel G. Van Slyke, ‘Confirmation: A Sacrament in Search of a Theology?’, *New Blackfriars* 92 (2011): 521–51, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01354.x> is very critical of Kavanagh’s thesis.

12 Johnson, *Christian Initiation*, 128; Spinks, *Early and Medieval Rituals*, 61–62.

13 The term ‘confirmation’ dates from the same time; see Turner, ‘Confirmation’, 84.

14 Johnson, *Christian Initiation*, 129–30.

15 Johnson, 178.

the original tradition of baptism, chrismation and first communion as a united rite till this day, referring to chrismation as the Pentecost of the individual and defending its biblical provenance by referring to the passages quoted above.¹⁶

3 The Sacrament of Confirmation in the Medieval West

Cyprian of Carthage had vaguely associated infant baptism with the idea of original sin. In his anti-Pelagian writings, Augustine strengthened this connection, arguing that the church would not have baptized children if they did not need it. Without this being a part of the original justification for baptizing children, it was thus used by Augustine as a way of explaining an already well-established practice.¹⁷ This had the probably unintended effect of emphasizing the urgency of baptism; if not baptized, one would still be captured by sin and the devil. Children were thus to be baptized as soon as possible, and even for adults, the period of instruction prior to baptism could be shorted if the catechumen was ill. When Christianity became the only accepted faith and all were Christian, the obligation of instruction was totally dispensed with, and the rule was to baptize all children as soon as possible. This was thus the medieval rule.¹⁸

In Rome, the tradition of a postbaptismal, episcopal blessing called confirmation was firmly established, and was during the 12th century given a liturgical shape that remained the Roman-Catholic liturgy for confirmation until 1971. Baptism, confirmation and first communion were still one coherent whole, though.¹⁹ Outside of Rome, however, the growing number of Christians made it impossible for bishops to be present at all initiations, and the solutions found for this problem in Rome was not transferable to other locations. Outside Rome, congregations therefore tended to dispense with the episcopal blessing, preferring to keep the unity of the rite.²⁰ With episcopal blessing becoming increasingly common even outside Rome, however, confirmation came to be separated from both baptism and first communion. If it is correct that confirmation was not so much a development from the baptismal anointing as

16 George Dion Dragas, 'The Seal of the Gift of the Holy Spirit: The Sacrament of Chrismation', *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 56 (2011): 143–59; Sergey Trostyanskiy, 'Chrismation', in *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, ed. John Anthony McGuckin (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 115–17.

17 Johnson, *Christian Initiation*, 154; Spinks, *Early and Medieval Rituals*, 65–66.

18 Johnson, *Christian Initiation*, 213–16.

19 Johnson, 188–89.

20 Johnson, 200–201.

from a separate Roman rite of episcopal blessing, what took place was not a separation of the original unity of baptism and chrismation/confirmation but an introduction of a new rite. Still, the outcome was that what had been – and in the Orthodox Church still is – a unity of baptism, chrismation and first communion became the Western liturgical practice of three different sacraments separated in time.²¹ The ideal first introduced by Pope Innocent I in the 5th century was by and large commonly accepted by the 12th.

The establishment of confirmation as a separate rite sent the theologians looking for reasons explaining its existence. Pope Innocent's reference to the apostles' laying on hands in Acts 8 was considered problematic as that would imply that the Holy Spirit was not given in baptism, and this was unanimously rejected. Instead, one tended to maintain that while the Holy Spirit was given in baptism, it was in confirmation given with a fullness that equipped Christians for spiritual battle. An exposition of this view is found as early as in a Pentecost homily from the 5th century. This homily was probably written by Faustus of Riez, who is mostly known for his Pelagian leanings,²² but it was attributed to Pope Milchiades from the early fourth century and was included in *Decretum Gratiani*.²³ It is impossible to avoid the impression that Faustus's argument entails a Semipelagian endorsement of confirmation to the detriment of the significance of baptism. He argues that while baptism may benefit those who are about to die, strengthening for life is given in confirmation. While the separation of baptism and confirmation may not in itself imply a Semipelagian soteriology, there is no doubt that it was interpreted in this way.

With confirmation as a separate rite, all elements were in place to establish the doctrine of seven sacraments, which was introduced with the *Sententia* of Petrus Lombardus (about 1095–1160).²⁴ On this foundation, Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) developed his doctrine of the sacraments, focusing on the essential

21 The basic study of this process is J. D. C. Fisher, *Christian Initiation: Baptism in the Medieval West. A Study in the Disintegration of the Primitive Rite of Initiation* (London: SPCK, 1965). Cf. the summary and critique in Johnson, *Christian Initiation*, 201–2.

22 Bengt Häggglund, *History of Theology* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007), 144.

23 Fisher, *Baptism in the Medieval West*, 125; Johnson, *Christian Initiation*, 146, which also quotes the central passages of the homily.

24 Häggglund, *History of Theology*, 192. Due to an ironic twist of events, even the Orthodox church has adopted the Roman-Catholic doctrine of the seven sacraments, though it is “neither dogmatic nor entirely consistent”, so Maria Gwyn McDowell, ‘Mystery (Sacrament)’, in *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, ed. John Anthony McGuckin (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 407–8. The doctrine of the seven sacraments remained controversial even in the West; as late as in the 15th century, cardinal Nicholas Cusanus maintained that only baptism and Eucharist were absolutely necessary; see Knut Alfsvåg, ‘Divine Difference and Religious Unity: On the Relation Between De Docta

elements and particular contribution of each of them. For confirmation, he found the charismatic oil and the episcopal laying on of hands to be essential,²⁵ and the particular contribution in his view consisted in spiritual strengthening, which he explained with a quote directly from Faustus/Melchiades.²⁶ The doctrine of seven sacraments including confirmation was endorsed by the Council of Lyon in 1274.²⁷

This new association of confirmation with spiritual maturity led to the postponement of confirmation. As late as the 13th century, parents could be rebuked if their children had not received episcopal confirmation within a year of being born, but from this time on, the time of “seven or later” became increasingly common and had become the norm by the 16th century.²⁸ This process of intellectualization led to a similar postponement of the first communion. The Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 suggested the “age of discretion” understood to be about seven as preferable for first communion, and it should be preceded, not by confirmation, but by first confession. This meant the completion of the process of separating the original union of baptism, chrismation and first communion into the three separate sacraments that have remained the norm in both the Roman-Catholic and the Protestant Churches.²⁹

4 The Reinvention of Confirmation during the Reformation

Confirmation in the Latin West was both a somewhat unstable construction with a Semipelagian flavor and an episcopal privilege. It was therefore nothing but natural that it should invite the critique of the Reformers. Martin Luther’s (1483–1546) *De captivitate babilonica* from 1520³⁰ thus introduces a new era in the history of confirmation in the Western church. Luther’s main contention was that the ecclesial institution had obscured the gospel of grace by furnishing

Ignorantia, De Pace Fidei and Cribratio Alkorani’, in *Nicholas of Cusa and Islam*, vol. 183, Studies in Medieval and Reformation Traditions (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014), 49–67.

25 Hägglund, *History of Theology*, 193.

26 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae: Latin text and English translation, introductions, notes, appendices and glossaries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 111,72,1; Johnson, *Christian Initiation*, 210. This is still how the theology of confirmation is developed by Roman-Catholics; see Slyke, ‘Confirmation: A Sacrament in Search of a Theology?’; Turner, ‘Confirmation’, 90–91.

27 Turner, ‘Confirmation’, 87.

28 Johnson, *Christian Initiation*, 211–12.

29 Johnson, 218–19.

30 Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: H. Böhlaus, 1883), hereafter referred to as WA, vol. 6,497–573. For an English translation, see Martin

human inventions with divine authority. He therefore wanted to distinguish between the merely traditional and the absolutely necessary, which he identified with the teaching of and about Christ as found in the Bible. He let this distinction define his understanding of sacrament, and thus concluded that there is but one sacrament (Christ)³¹ and three sacramental signs instituted by Christ: Baptism, penitence,³² and the Lord's Supper.³³ The essential elements of baptism he considered to be immersion in water and faith in the word of promise.³⁴ Concerning confirmation, Luther had no objection concerning the laying on of hands, but he objected to considering confirmation as an episcopal privilege a biblically warranted sacrament. In Luther's view, it sufficed to call this "a churchly rite or sacramental ceremony."³⁵ For Luther, baptism was both initiation and the foundation of the life as a Christian.³⁶

There was nothing particularly radical about this; it was basically a restoration of the rite of initiation as practiced in the early church and among the Greek-Orthodox, and Luther's first baptismal liturgy from 1523 retained post-baptismal anointing.³⁷ True to his biblical and Augustinian emphasis

Luther, *Luther's Works*, 55 vols (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958), hereafter referred to as LW, vol. 36, 11-126.

- 31 Cf. 1 Tim 3:16, which in the Vulgate translation reads: "magnum est pietatis sacramentum quod manifestatum est in carne."
- 32 The biblical references are Matt 16:19; 18:18 and John 20:23; see WA 6,543; LW 36,82.
- 33 "si usu scripturae loqui velim, non nisi unum sacramentum habeam et tria signa sacramentalia"; WA 6,501; LW 36,18.
- 34 WA 6,527-533; LW 36,58-66.
- 35 "Satis est pro ritu quodam Ecclesiastico seu cerimonia sacramentali confirmationem habere"; WA 6,549-550; LW 36,91-92. On Luther's critique of the sacrament of confirmation, see further Bjarne Hareide, *Konfirmasjonen i reformasjonstiden: En undersøkelse av den lutherske konfirmasjon i Tyskland 1520-1585*, (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1966), 28-42. This book is also published in German as Bjarne Hareide, *Die Konfirmation in der Reformationszeit. Eine Untersuchung der lutherischen Konfirmation in Deutschland 1520-1585*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1972); page numbers in the following refer to the Norwegian edition. For a summary of Luther's position, see also Paul Turner, *The Meaning and Practice of Confirmation: Perspectives from a Sixteenth-Century Controversy* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987), 7-13.
- 36 For a summary of Luther's understanding of baptism, see Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville, Fortress Press ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 298-302.
- 37 WA 12,42-48; LW 53,95-103; Johnson, *Christian Initiation*, 214; Bryan D. Spinks, *Reformation and Modern Rituals and Theologies of Baptism: From Luther to Contemporary Practices* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 9-13. He even played with the idea of infant communion, though in practice seems to have followed the medieval rule of communing children from the age of discernment at about seven; see Scott J Meyer, 'Martin Luther, Lutheran Theology, and Paedocommunion: History, Compatibility, and Appraisal', *Currents in Theology and Mission* 45 (2018): 31-37.

on water and immersion,³⁸ he left out anointing in his 1526 baptismal liturgy, replacing it with the putting on of the christening robe while the priest proclaims the newly baptized to be regenerated through water and the Holy Spirit.³⁹ Later Lutheran baptismal liturgies have basically followed this pattern. From an historical and ecumenical point of view, one can deplore the omission of anointing, but Luther was hardly aware of the antiquity of this part of the liturgy. He may therefore not have been entirely correct in numbering anointing with the human embellishments, even if he no doubt was right that the New Testament texts do not emphasize anointing the way they do with baptism in water.⁴⁰

Luther and his collaborators considered catechesis important but did not connect it with confirmation.⁴¹ Catechesis was, however, closely related to the admission to the Lord's table. Luther thus replaced the 13th century demand for confession before communion with a catechetical examination.⁴² He thus did not restore the early church's consideration of baptism as the only requirement for communion – he was probably not even aware of it.⁴³ The one who connected the dots and reintroduced confirmation as an examination of the prospective communicants' knowledge of the catechism was Martin Bucer (1491–1551), the reformer of Strasbourg.⁴⁴ Part of the reason for this seems to have been an attempt to answer the critique of the anabaptists that the church did not distinguish between true believers and those who were Christians in name only.⁴⁵ The understanding of confirmation as the real entrance into the fellowship of believers combined with procedures for church discipline to help with the process of sanctification⁴⁶ eased the tension and allowed Landgrave

38 On Luther's emphasis on immersion, see Johnson, *Christian Initiation*, 242.

39 "Der Almechtige Gott und vater unsers herrn Jhesu Christi, der dich anderweyt geporn hat durchs wasser und den heiligen geist . . ."; WA 19,537–541; LW 53,106–109.

40 The word 'baptism' means 'dipping' or 'immersing' in water, a fact Luther also makes his readers aware of (WA 6,531; LW 36,34).

41 Hareide, *Konfirmasjonen i reformasjonstiden*, 69–81.

42 Hareide, 85–88; Karl Dienst, 'Konfirmation I. Historisch', in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1990), 438. This may have been the reason he did not fully endorse infant communion.

43 He was aware, though, that the Hussites practiced infant communion; see Meyer, 'Paedocommunion', 31.

44 This connection between catechesis and confirmation was anticipated by the Waldensians and the Bohemian Brethren; see Dienst, 'Konfirmation', 437.

45 Turner, *Meaning and Practice of Confirmation*, 28.

46 This was at variance with Luther's approach; see Hareide, *Konfirmasjonen i reformasjonstiden*, 135–37. On Bucer's emphasis on church discipline and personal confession, see also Richard Robert Osmer, *Confirmation: Presbyterian Practices in Ecumenical Perspective* (Louisville: Westminster, 2006), 77–80.

Philip to refrain from taking drastic measures against the anabaptists in Strasbourg.

Confirmation was thus understood as a completion of a process of initiation that started with baptism, even though the two rites were separated in time by several years, and this has remained an important element in the understanding of Christian initiation in Protestant Churches that baptize children.⁴⁷ At the same time, confirmation was understood as a rite of spiritual strengthening of the believers that to a large extent followed the Roman-Catholic pattern.⁴⁸ This heavily influenced the later understanding of confirmation both for Lutherans and Anglicans, with the addition that the Anglicans retained the understanding of confirmation as an episcopal privilege.⁴⁹

There was thus agreement concerning confirmation to the extent that it was a topic in the discussions of a rapprochement between Lutherans and Roman-Catholics in the 1540's.⁵⁰ This came to nothing, though, and the Council in Trent reinforced the late medieval positions against the critique of the Reformers, insisting that Christ had instituted the seven sacraments including confirmation⁵¹ and continuing the tradition of separating baptism, first communion and confirmation.⁵² But the Council held the door open for the possibility of admitting children to the Eucharist immediately after having received baptism,⁵³ and it showed that it had after all learned something from

47 "Protestants . . . tend to understand confirmation . . . as "sealing" the promises of baptism, "affirming" or "confirming" the baptismal vows"; Kenda Creasy Dean and Katherine M. Douglass, 'Introduction', in *Cultivating Teen Faith*, ed. Osmer and Douglass (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 2.

48 According to Turner, *Meaning and Practice of Confirmation*, 301, "the rite [of the Reformers] is in keeping with . . . the medieval Roman Catholic Church . . . except for its non-sacramental nature."

49 Hareide, *Konfirmasjonen i reformasjonstiden*, 104–42; Johnson, *Christian Initiation*, 270–78.

50 Hareide, *Konfirmasjonen i reformasjonstiden*, 148–62.

51 Sessio septima, Decretum de sacramentis, canon I; Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), 2:119; Turner, *Meaning and Practice of Confirmation*, 29–32. On the Council's discussion of this point, see Hareide, *Konfirmasjonen i reformasjonstiden*, 196–99. On the defence of the biblical justification for confirmation in the work of Robert Bellarmine (1542–1621), see Turner, *Meaning and Practice of Confirmation*, 75. His central proof text was Acts 8:16–17 (Turner, 252–54).

52 Johnson, *Christian Initiation*, 283. For a summary of the critique of the Council's doctrine of confirmation in Martin Chemnitz' *Examen Concilii Tridentini*, see Turner, *Meaning and Practice of Confirmation*, 64–68. Unfortunately, "it was not met with openness but with the same authoritative assuredness which accompanied the anathemas of the Council"; so Turner, 300.

53 Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 2:174; Johnson, *Christian Initiation*, 281. For a discussion of the eastern rite of chrismation from a contemporary Roman-Catholic perspective, see

the Reformers emphasis on catechesis.⁵⁴ Even through the church after the Reformation was split in the differing branches of Greek-Orthodox, Roman-Catholic and Protestant, there were some overlapping emphases as far as the doctrine and practice of confirmation were concerned.

5 Later Developments and the Present Situation

The emphasis on catechesis and the desacramentalization of confirmation defined the Protestant understanding of confirmation as an ecclesiastical graduation ceremony. This understanding was strengthened during the period of Pietism and Enlightenment.⁵⁵ For the Pietists, catechesis should not only give the youth the necessary knowledge; it should also serve their spiritual awakening. At confirmation, the youth should therefore confess their faith individually, and thus take upon themselves the responsibility of an individual faith life that at baptism had been promised vicariously by the parents and sponsors.⁵⁶ After having confessed their faith in this way, they could (or should – this changed with time and depended on local custom) receive the Lord's Supper for the first time. The theological interest thus shifted from baptism to individual confession. The parallel between the medieval and Pietist understanding of confirmation is quite close, with the exception that the Pietists replaced the significance of episcopal blessing with the deep-felt confession of faith by the individual. It thus retained, and arguably even strengthened, the possibility of being interpreted according to a Semipelagian pattern.

The emphasis on instruction before confirmation spearheaded the development of compulsory education for all children in Protestant Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries.⁵⁷ Confirmation was made compulsory, and primary school was seen primarily as preparation for confirmation.⁵⁸ Confirmation thus came to be seen not only as the completion of Christian education, but

Paul Turner, *Confirmation: The Baby in Solomon's Court* (New York: Paulinst Press, 1993), 23–35.

54 Johnson, *Christian Initiation*, 285.

55 Dienst, 'Konfirmation', 441–43.

56 A similar emphasis on individual confession is seen also among the Presbyterians; see Turner, *The Baby in Solomon's Court*, 55.

57 Dienst, 'Konfirmation', 442.

58 For Norway as a test case, see Brynjar Haraldsø, 'Konfirmasjonen i Den norske kirke i 250 år: En historisk oversikt', in *Konfirmasjonen i går og i dag*, ed. Haraldsø (Oslo: Verbum, 1986), 18–23. For a list of dates for the introduction of compulsory confirmation in German countries, see Dienst, 'Konfirmation' 442.

as a rite of passage that signaled the transition from childhood to the world of the adults.⁵⁹ After having received confirmation at about the age of 15, one was supposed to be able to support oneself. If for some reason a person did not receive confirmation, that person was never perceived as a full member of the society of responsible citizens.

The history of the Protestant confirmation is thus a mixed bag. There is no doubt that it raised the level of literacy and general knowledge in the population. At the same time, it established a connection between individual confession of faith and societal position that both secularized confirmation and reduced the significance of baptism. Christian confirmation as the requirement for being accepted as civilized person was thus a system that during the 19th century was met with severe criticism and subsequently was changed.⁶⁰ However, the understanding of confirmation as a rite of passage is still fairly strong in the Protestant national Churches in Northern Europe and is considered a big family event to the extent that it has been adopted even by the secularists.⁶¹

To some extent we have a parallel development among the Roman-Catholics, even if the understanding of confirmation as a sacrament created a different dynamic. Even the post-Tridentine Catholic Church emphasized catechesis, which could be seen either as a preparation for first communion or for confirmation, and the order could change according to local custom.⁶² However, the liturgical movement in the 20th century brought real renewal even concerning the understanding of confirmation. For one thing, it restored an understanding of the sacramental character of the church that has been described as a renewal of insights from Luther's *De captivitate*, where he describes Christ is the true sacrament and baptism, confession, and the Lord's Supper as sacramental signs.⁶³ There was also a renewed interest in the liturgies of the early church. In 1972, the Roman-Catholic Church published a new Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, which restored the original rite of initiation composed

59 Christian Grethlein, 'Confirmation (Protestant)', in *Religion Past & Present* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007), 396.

60 On Norway as a case study of this development, see Åge Holter, 'Den lange debatten: Noen hovedpunkter i konfirmasjonsdebatten fra 1850-årene til den nye ordningen 1911/12', in *Konfirmasjonen i går og i dag*, ed. Brynjar Haraldsø (Oslo: Verbum, 1986), 66–79. For a summary of the German debate, see Grethlein, 'Confirmation (Protestant)', 396.

61 'Secular Coming-of-Age Ceremony', in *Wikipedia*, accessed 17 March 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Secular_coming-of-age_ceremony&oldid=1009724836.

62 Johnson, *Christian Initiation*, 297–300.

63 Johnson, 305–6; cf. note 33 above.

of baptism, confirmation as laying on of hands, chrismation (not necessarily performed by the bishop), and first communion.⁶⁴ As far as the baptism of children is concerned, however, postbaptismal anointing (which may be omitted) is not seen as confirmation. The separation of baptism, confirmation and first communion thus remains, and the order of the latter two is still not quite consistent.⁶⁵

The liturgical movement has also influenced the Anglican and Lutheran communities, and through these also Churches belonging to the Reformed tradition.⁶⁶ Two central aspects of this influence are the restoration of postbaptismal anointing (chrismation) of newly baptized children and the invitation of children to the Lord's table without formal requirements for instruction or confirmation. As far as postbaptismal anointing is concerned, Lutheran Churches in North America have now adopted variations of Luther's 1523 baptismal liturgy instead of the simpler 1526 version, thus including optional anointing.⁶⁷ Confirmation has been maintained as a rite of blessing after a period of catechesis,⁶⁸ but the Pietist tradition of the confirmands' individual confession has been abolished⁶⁹ and the connection with first communion has been broken. Since the 1960's there has been a movement both among North American and European Lutherans to invite children to the Lord's table before confirmation, and the Anglicans have experienced a similar development.⁷⁰

There thus seems to be a growing consensus among Protestants concerning the impossibility of setting a minimum age for the first communion; the Eucharist is a mystery which surpasses the understanding of humans at any age. Before the Eucharist we are therefore all equals as God's children. Both postbaptismal blessing and infant communion have been controversial, though. The Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS) has criticized the rite of postbaptismal blessing because it allegedly separates the gift of the Holy Spirit from baptism in water,⁷¹ and does not practice infant communion because this Church thinks catechetical instruction should be given before first

64 Turner, *The Baby in Solomon's Court*, 5–22; Johnson, *Christian Initiation*, 307–17.

65 Johnson, *Christian Initiation*, 318–25.

66 On the common emphases of the Protestant Churches in this respect, see Johnson, 293–95.

67 Johnson, 340–41.

68 Johnson, 344–46.

69 For a discussion of this issue, see Walter Neidhart, 'Konfirmation II. Praktisch-Theologisch', in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1990), 447.

70 Johnson, *Christian Initiation*, 328–331; Henning Schröer, 'Children's Communion', in *Religion Past & Present* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007).

71 Johnson, *Christian Initiation*, 343–44.

communion.⁷² The issue remains controversial also in Churches belonging to the Reformed tradition.⁷³ Both in the LCMS, The United Methodist Church, and among Presbyterians confirmation (or personal confession; Presbyterians have traditionally been reluctant to use the word ‘confirmation’)⁷⁴ is required for full membership for those who are baptized as children.⁷⁵ It is thus seen as an essential part of the process of initiation. We may therefore conclude that there is a tendency, at least among Lutherans and Anglicans, toward returning to the early church’s understanding of baptism as the only requirement for admission to the Lord’s table, but this is neither unanimous nor uncontroversial.

These are the main debates and disagreements concerning initiation and confirmation today. Where do we go from here in a way that is both ecumenically informed and helpful for those involved in leading persons through processes of initiation, instruction, and confirmation in different denominational contexts?

6 Toward an Ecumenical Theology of Initiation and Confirmation

The Greek-Orthodox tend to insist that they represent the unbroken tradition from the early church.⁷⁶ At least as far as the discussion of Christian initiation is concerned, there is something to be said in favor of this position; there is an unbroken continuity in the way the rite of initiation is celebrated among the Greek-Orthodox. The New Testament does not give instructions for chrismation the way it does for baptism in water. There is no doubt, however, that chrismation as part of the rite of initiation is of ancient origin and reflects biblical imagery.

72 ‘A Statement by the Faculty of Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Concerning the Communion of Infants’, *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 79 (2015): 350; John T. Pless, ‘Theses on Infant/Toddler Communion’, *Logia: A Journal of Lutheran Theology* 24 (2015): 68–72.

73 For support of infant communion, see Tim Gallant, *Feed My Lambs: Why the Lord’s Table Should Be Restored to Covenant Children* (Grande Prairie, AB: Grande Prairie, AB, Canada: Pa, 2002); for a rejection, see Cornelis P Venema, *Children at the Lord’s Table? Assessing the Case for Paedocommunion* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2009).

74 They are here following the example of Calvin (and Luther); see Osmer, *Confirmation: Presbyterian practices in ecumenical perspective*, 80–86. As documented by the title of Osmer’s book, though, they do not necessarily apply this reticence today.

75 Turner, *The Baby in Solomon’s Court*, 55.

76 Reinhard Thöle, ‘Orthodox Churches II. The Branches of Orthodoxy’, in *Religion Past & Present* (Leiden and Boston, 2011), 397.

There seems to be a growing understanding among other denominations of this, while at the same time representatives of the Orthodox tradition recognize that the postbaptismal laying on of hands and proclamation that the baptizand has received and been sealed with the Holy Spirit is but another way of expressing what Orthodox chrismation emphasizes.⁷⁷ While the actual use of *myron* due to its lack of New Testament provenance could hardly be considered a condition of church unity, its reintroduction could enrich the understanding of baptism and is thus well worth pondering even for other denominations.

There is also a growing and well-documented consensus that baptism is the only condition for acceptance at the Lord's table that can be set with any kind of consistency. The idea of the age of discretion as a requirement was introduced in the Middle Ages and thus lacks the provenance of tradition, and its biblical support is dubious at best. The opponents of infant communion usually understand 1 Corinthians 11:28–29 to imply that those who receive communion should be able to know what they are doing in the sense that they can explain the difference between the Lord's Supper and ordinary food – hence the need for catechesis before first communion.⁷⁸ However, the context of this passage is a discussion of the dignity of the Eucharist liturgy, not infant communion, and the requirement of a certain intellectual capacity for receiving communion would place the mentally disabled permanently outside the fellowship at the Lord's table, which arguably is rather the opposite of what this passage tells us.⁷⁹ In the kingdom of God, the children are the example of the adults, and we should take care to not confuse this principle.

While the letting go of a minimum age requirement for being admitted at the Lord's table is to be commended, there has hardly been any attempts – apart from the Roman Catholic Rite for Initiation of Adults – to restore first communion as an integrated part of the liturgy of initiation. There may be reasons to reintroduce this as well. There are certain advantages of having a definite first communion, and when that is neither baptism (as practiced by the Greek-Orthodox) nor confirmation (as has sometimes been the case both among Roman-Catholics and among Protestants more or less from the 18th

77 The statement from the 12th Plenary of the International Lutheran-Orthodox Joint Commission from 2004 on “Baptism and Chrismation as Sacraments of Initiation into the Church” is an interesting example of this; see ‘Lutheran-Orthodox Joint Commission Common Statements’, accessed 17 March 2021, <https://blogs.helsinki.fi/ristosaarinen/lutheran-orthodox-dialogue/>.

78 See, e.g., Pless, ‘Theses on Infant Communion’.

79 Julie Marie Land, ‘Remember as Re-Membering: The Eucharist, 1 Corinthians 11:17–34, and Profound Intellectual Disability’, *Studia Liturgica* 50 (2020): 152–62, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0039320720946040>.

century to the 20th century), one is left in limbo, and the admission of children to the Lord's table is for all practical purposes left to the discretion of the parents. Even the understanding of baptism as the condition for receiving communion may then get lost, if not in theory so in practice.⁸⁰

A full discussion of the cultural context and theological reasons for inviting the unbaptized to the Lord's table is beyond the scope of this article. However, two major problems immediately come to mind. This is a practice that lacks both biblical and traditional provenance and could thus hardly be considered ecumenically acceptable. In addition, it may confuse the biblical message of salvation by grace with an idea of unspecified acceptance without either salvation or grace, in which case it could hardly be seen as theological progress. One of the great gifts of baptism is admission to the Lord's table, and the rite of baptism should be administered in a way that clarifies, not obscures this connection. Whether this can be done without fully adopting the Greek-Orthodox tradition of administering the Eucharist to the newly baptized infants remains to be seen, but the issue should be discussed both among Roman-Catholics and Protestants.

But if confirmation is stripped of its possible role as condition for first communion, what role is left for it to play? As has been shown in the historical overview, confirmation as a separate rite is a medieval invention with Semipelagian connotations, and its reintroduction in the Reformation is related to an Anabaptist emphasis that cannot but question the significance of baptism. This understanding of confirmation as a rite of graduation into spiritual and civil maturity was strengthened during the era of Pietism and Enlightenment and has led to the present situation where confirmation is seen as an essential part of the church's transmission of its faith to the coming generation. This instruction is certainly important; a church that does not teach her members as Jesus explicitly told his disciples to do will soon die. There is, however, no reason to limit instruction to a short period in the life of the churches' teenagers. Instruction during preparation for confirmation should therefore be seen as an element in a lifelong process of catechesis. To the extent that this understanding of instruction is adopted, confirmation becomes less of a graduation ceremony than it once was.⁸¹

80 This is repeatedly referred to as an implication of infant communion in Olaf Aagedal, Ånund Brottveit, and Tore Witsø Rafoss, *Då barna opna nattverden: Ein studie av barnenattverd i Den norske kyrkja*, KIFO-rapport, 2019:1 (Oslo: KIFO, 2019). For different perspectives on this topic, see Gregg Mast et al., 'The Lord's Supper as Welcoming Sacrament? Reversing the Sequence of the Sacraments', *Reformed Journal*, 1 November 2016, <https://reformedjournal.com/the-lords-supper-as-welcoming-sacrament-reversing-the-sequence-of-the-sacraments/>.

81 This is emphasized in Neidhart, 'Konfirmation'.

This seemingly leaves the rite of confirmation void of theological content. At the same time, its social role as a rite of passage is still strong both among Protestants and Roman-Catholics. Teenagers come to the church to be prepared for the rite of confirmation, and in responding to that wish church workers should know what they are doing. Our task is thus to give a theologically valid content to a rite that lacks New Testament provenance and to do so without succumbing to the temptation of filling it with theological content by seeing it as the fulfilment of something allegedly incomplete in the rite of baptism. As the historical overview has shown, there is hardly a denomination that has kept its path clean in this respect. However, the gospel of grace and forgiveness and the possibility of a new start is a reality not only for individuals, but even for denominations.

The Roman-Catholic and the Anglican Churches may have an advantage in this respect, as their considering the episcopal blessing as essential in confirmation may open the possibility of interpreting confirmation primarily as a rite of confirming the youth's belonging in the church.⁸² They are at the threshold of finding their own way in life. It thus makes sense for the church to restate their belonging in the church just at this time, and this can be done without any hint of there being any deficiency the baptism they already have received. Neither Lutherans nor Reformed are likely to accept the idea of confirmation as an episcopal privilege – after all, this, too, is a doctrine without New Testament justification – but even for these denominations it should be possible to consider the church's confirmation of the youth's ecclesial standing as the definition of what is theologically significant with the rite of confirmation.

This even suggests a path to be followed for those responsible for preparing the confirmands for confirmation. What is the significance of being included in the Christian church? It is to be included in fellowship founded by Christ's manifestation of divine love and characterized by instruction on how to observe all Christ has commanded as the guiding principle of one's life. Christ has told us how to do that, and he did it by setting examples that should be recognizable even by 21st century teenagers.

7 Conclusions

The risen Christ gave his disciples the task of proclaiming a gospel of grace, and he also instituted the basics of how this should be done. The churches have implemented these instructions in different ways. These implementations are

82 This is suggested from a Roman-Catholic point of view in Slyke, *Confirmation*.

not equal in the sense that they all mediate the gospel equally well; still, there is no single pattern that could be seen as the one size fits all model for the different contexts wherein which we find ourselves today. A unified practice of the rites of initiation is thus an objective that may be neither realizable nor desirable. However, there are elements in this process that are ecumenically indispensable, and these elements should therefore be taken seriously by all churches. The priority and significance of baptism for inclusion in the Christian fellowship and admission to the Lord's table are basic, and care should be taken not to confuse this principle. While rites and traditions for taking care of instruction and spiritual growth are equally indispensable, these should not be presented and understood as learning goals on the way to one's graduation as a Christian, but as means for growing in dependence on the grace of God as incarnated in the life and work of Christ. In agreeing on this goal, we should be able to learn from each other in the way we try to achieve it.

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