

Confirmation

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As the word implies, “confirmation” literally means to “work together, to make firm.” Thus, a service of “confirmation” firms up the promises made at baptism. This rite (which is not a sacrament *per se*) became necessary as the Church spread in the early years.

As the Church grew, there was a very real possibility that there could be a chronological lag between the person’s baptism and the person’s profession of his or her faith before the church’s leader. In the earliest years of the Church, baptism was usually accompanied by the laying on of hands, and sometimes anointing with oil, by the church’s chief pastor (who later came to be called a *bishop*). As the Church spread, sometimes these events became separated by years. At the same time, the Church looked for an appropriate way to symbolize the adult commitment of those who had been baptized as infants. Bishop John Hines, the former Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church, wrote that the specific rite of confirmation grew out of ceremonies “designed to prepare the adolescent for the future struggle against the forces of evil. Later feeling was that as one entered the years in which life became increasingly difficult, there was a definite need to renew vows and to make that public.”

In the Middle Ages, confirmation became a prerequisite for receiving the Holy Communion. In this view, baptism was seen to parallel circumcision while confirmation was seen to parallel the *Bar Mitzva* at which time a Jewish boy became a man (literally, a “son of the law”) and could take his place in the synagogue. The unfortunate side effect of this practice was that the age of confirmation was made younger and younger in an attempt to make the full life of the Church more available to more people. The result was that, rather than being a deliberate, thoughtful, adult profession of a mature faith, confirmation was becoming a hurdle to leap or a hoop to jump through. The underlying message was that Communion was something one earned rather than a gift God offers to all his children.

Happily, Anglican churches are reverting to the practice of the early Christians and encouraging children to receive Communion prior to confirmation (but with adequate and age-appropriate instruction). Confirmation then occurs

later, when it can be an expression of a more thoughtful and mature commitment to Christ. As Bishop Hines suggests, “The responsibility and commitment at baptism are really with the sponsors and the congregation. . . . What confirmation can be is the opportunity for the baptized member to enter into a concrete covenant, a real commitment.” And that is just the point. Baptism may itself be an expression of a real commitment if one has never been baptized and is converted as an adult. But if one has been raised in a Christian home, was baptized as an infant, and becomes converted as a result of one’s upbringing, then such a person will naturally want to confirm in his or her own name the vows made in his or her behalf in infancy. Thus, because each Christian soul is, by definition, a person who has “professed” his or her faith, each Christian person can lay claim to be a “professional Christian.” And, how happy is the person whose life and actions are rooted in that which he or she professes.

What does confirmation itself do? First, let us say what it *does not* do. It does not make one a Christian. It does not make one a better Christian. It does not make one more loved or loveable or acceptable to God or the pastor. Here is what confirmation *does*:

- It *does* connect us with the historic church, the “great cloud of witnesses” that have gone before us and on whose shoulders and in whose shadows we dare to take our stand.
- It *does* give us a chance to publically profess our faith. As Jesus said, “Everyone who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven” (Matthew 10:32-33). Saint Paul added: “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9).
- It *does* give us a home, a place to “be,” a family with which to identify, gripe about, rejoice with, cry with, and love.

- It *does* confirm the covenant God made with us when we were baptized. Even if one cannot remember one's baptism, God remembers it (he was there, too) and he wants to honor it and to bring its promise to fruition.

Confirmation is when adult men and women stand before God, their family and friends, their local church, and the Church universal to publically profess three things: (a) their renunciation of "the world, the flesh, and devil," (b) their trust in Jesus Christ as their Savior, and (c) their desire to follow and obey him as their Lord and Master. Based on these affirmations of faith in Jesus Christ and the vow to obey him as Lord, the bishop then places his hands on the person and welcomes him or her into the full fellowship of the Church with a prayer of blessing.

It is important to note that there is no mention of Anglicanism in the confirmation service. A confirmand is not making a commitment to being an Anglican. He or she is making a public commitment to Jesus Christ. That commitment is simply being witnessed and affirmed in an Anglican church.

For Anglicans, bishops are important symbols of the unity of the Church, not only around the world but throughout the ages. When we are welcomed into the Church by a bishop, we are symbolically connected to the entire body of Christ: visible and invisible, divisible and indivisible, militant and triumphant.

As Christians, we believe the Church is the body of Christ. Therefore, it has four characteristics: it is one, it is holy, it is catholic (universal), and it is apostolic. Saint Paul spoke of the oneness, the unity and universal nature, of the Church in his letter to the church in Ephesus: "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Ephesians 4:3-6). Saint Peter wrote of the necessity of holiness in the life of the Church in his first letter: "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9). And Saint Luke wrote of the apostolic nature of the Church in Acts: "They devoted

themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42).

Why do Anglicans typically require those who have been "confirmed" in a non-Episcopal church to get confirmed again? If a person was confirmed by a minister other than a bishop (for example, in a Presbyterian Church), Anglican churches respectfully request that such a person reaffirm the vows made at baptism be confirmed in the presence of a bishop who officially welcomes the person into the full fellowship of the Church. It may seem a small thing, but Anglicans believe it to be important because confirmation symbolizes joining the Church, not just one local manifestation of it, and bishops represent the larger Church.

Confirmation is only for those people who take their faith, *the* Faith, and their role in the Body seriously. Nothing good comes easily. Confirmation is one way for God to show that he loves you and for you to grow in your love for God. No more. No less.

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