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Whither Common Worship Confirmation?

Through an examination of Anglican services of Confirmation, both historical and across the Communion, Phillip Tovey argues that there are unresolved tensions in *Common Worship's* provision. He argues that the case for exclusively episcopal confirmation is weakening. Bishops should focus more on mission and leading initiation of converts and we should let confirmation become a pastoral rite that could be led by a presbyter.

Common Worship Initiation Services has been around since 1998. There has been quite a swell of criticism of the baptism rite's length and language. As yet, not much attention has been drawn to the confirmation material. On the surface it looks like the ASB and has often been introduced in parishes with an ASB ethos. I want, however, to argue that the inherent tensions in the initiation provision are a result of an uncompleted baptism debate and that this will fuel a desire for further reform. The way I propose to do this is to begin by looking at models of confirmation in Church of England Prayer Books, then to look at the unresolved tensions in *Common Worship*, and finally suggest a radical way forward.

Models of Confirmation 1549-1662

The Edwardian Prayer Books of 1549 and 1552 retained episcopal confirmation, while Luther, Oslander, and other Reformers were abandoning it.¹ 1549 was perhaps one of the most conservative of any Reformation rite of confirmation. It inserted the reformed approach of catechising children, in the Apostles Creed, Ten Commandments, and Lord's Prayer, while modifying the Sarum rite of confirmation. Chrism was removed from confirmation (but not baptism), but, by staying so close to the medieval rite, confirmation was probably seen by some as 'a means of grace wherein the Holy Spirit was sacramentally imparted'.²

1552 removed the idea of any sacramental initiation in confirmation. The offending prayers modified from Sarum were removed and a new composition made as the confirmation prayer: 'Defend, O Lord...'. Since the ASB this is said by the congregation, a move incipiently anticipated by Cosin who, commenting on the episcopal prayer of 1552, said 'this prayer seems to be rather a prayer that may be said by any minister, than a confirmation that was reserved only to the bishop'.³

1 J.D.C. Fisher, *Christian Initiation: The Reformation Period*, SPCK, London 1970.

2 Fisher, *Christian Initiation*, p 253.

3 Fisher, *Christian Initiation*, p 253.

These two prayer books provide the background for confirmation in the reformed Church of England. First, their context was one where all were baptised as infants. Baptism of adults was so rare that, practically, it did not happen; indeed there was no liturgical provision for it at all. Secondly, 'none shall be admitted to the holy Communion: until such time as he (can say the catechism and) be confirmed' (1552 addition in brackets). This inclusion of a medieval English canon from 1281 insisted on confirmation before communion and so closed the possibility of infant communion as had been practised by some reformed groups e.g. the Hussites.⁴ Thirdly, confirmation was set in a pastoral catechetical context. This was the great reformation contribution. Children, all of whom were baptised, were expected to be catechised before being admitted to the Lord's Supper. This is strongly argued by Calvin (in *Institutes* 4:16:30) based on the need to 'discern the body'. This then ties into the next point.

The pastoral and liturgical provision used in the Edwardian and Elizabethan reigns was to be modified for a number of reasons. First, questions were raised about the propriety of baptising infants, and by the time of 1662 there were teenagers in England who were not baptised. Mission had also led to the need for a rite of adult baptism, be it because of the slaves in the West Indies, or the native peoples in the American colonies. 1662 therefore added *Publick Baptism of such as are of Riper Years*. This led to a crack in the absolute of 'no communion before confirmation', 1662 adding to the final rubric the possibility of admitting to communion those who are 'ready and desirous to be confirmed'. In part this was practical: it enabled adults who had been baptised as adults to receive communion. It also enabled those baptised as children to be admitted where no bishop was to tread, both in the American colonies and in dioceses where there were only infrequent visits by bishops (who were gainfully employing themselves in London). 1662, however, continued the catechetical tradition and resisted any attempt from more radical groups to allow presbyteral confirmation. Indeed, the mood at the time was of episcopal ascendancy, so political factors came to play their part.

Confirmation policy

It may seem that the stability of Prayer Book from 1662 until 1928 would imply stability of theory and practice of baptism and confirmation. Not so! Ordered catechising did not always work, and you were dependant on a, perhaps fleeting, bishop for confirmation. Richard Baxter was confirmed around 1630 by a passing bishop in the churchyard with thirty others. There was no examination of faith, they were 'passed hastily over', and the ceremony was done without much understanding.⁵ This may account for Baxter's later stress on the pastor's need to do personal catechising, while surprisingly still holding to the value of confirmation.

In other periods, confirmation was administered to huge numbers either in the cathedral or in large churches. In 1737, Bishop Benson confirmed nearly 9,000 in Halifax over three days working from 9am till 7pm.⁶ This sort of service was not

4 D. Holeton, *Infant Communion – Then and Now*, Grove Liturgical Study No. 27, Grove Books, Bramcote 1981.

5 S.L. Ollard, 'Confirmation in the Anglican Communion', in *Confirmation Vol. 1 Historical and Doctrinal*, SPCK, London 1926, p 124.

6 Ollard, 'Confirmation', p 199.

always edifying and the confusion in the cathedral at one confirmation in 1883 led to a book of protest arguing against the scene of riot and disorder.⁷

In reaction to this there was a Victorian confirmation policy reform movement. Baptism and confirmation were promoted and bishops started to visit more parishes for confirmation services.⁸ Teaching the catechism was taken seriously and this linked into the development of the Sunday school movement. Technology was also a factor. The railway mania led to most parishes being more accessible than ever they had been. Bishops could travel in relative comfort compared to previous generations. Bishop Samuel Wilberforce of Oxford was one of the episcopal reformers. He increased the number of centres for confirmation from 9 to 188. He aimed to visit them triennially. He also saw this as an opportunity to keep in touch with his clergy. In 1858-60 he confirmed 19,000 candidates, compared to the 9,000 in 1846-8.⁹ This was a sacramental mission model to a Christian nation.

The Victorian model was to dominate the 20th century and to be carried into the 21st. There was still, however, uncertainty as to the theology of the practice of confirmation. For over a century controversy and learned debate have raged in books, articles, and church policy documents. This was made even more complex by the change in ecumenical climate as the 20th century progressed. The debate is seen in the changing agenda in the prayer books and is only partially resolved in *Common Worship*.

Models of Confirmation 1928 and 1980

Mason's *The Relation of Baptism to Confirmation* (1890) was perhaps the most influential in arguing for a 'two-staging case'.¹⁰ Initiation became baptism plus confirmation. This is perhaps most closely symbolised in the 1928 'An Alternative Order of Confirmation'. It included the Samaritan example, with a reading from Acts 8 in the introduction to confirmation, and asserts 'The Scripture here teacheth us that a special gift of the Holy Spirit is bestowed through the laying on of hands with prayer'. While this does not go so far as some of the two stagings, it is the sign of their ascendancy.

Scholarship was, however, to see difficulties in this position both in terms of theology and history. It was to be gradually replaced by a 'unifying' theory most clearly developed by Fisher.¹¹ This theory starts with a unified rite (e.g. Hippolytus), in which adults and infants were baptised, 'confirmed' by the bishop, and receive Holy Communion. What was united in the early church and sundered in the medieval period was to be joined together in the ASB. Thus the main rite of the ASB is baptism, confirmation, and Holy Communion. All the other services in the ASB (e.g. infant baptism or confirmation) are derivative from this unified rite.

This may seem to be a patristic move in the initiation provision, but there were other things going on in the ASB. A strong evangelical position can be seen in the articulation of faith: 'you must answer for yourselves and for this child'. This was in line with the Keele Statement and a tightening of baptismal policy, linked to a

7 Ollard, 'Confirmation', p 213.

8 P.J. Jagger, *Clouded Witness*, Pickwick Publications, Alison Park 1982.

9 Jagger, *Clouded Witness*, p 115.

10 See C.O. Buchanan, *Anglican Confirmation*, Grove Liturgical Study No. 48, Grove Books, Bramcote 1986.

11 J.D.C. Fisher, *Christian Initiation: Baptism in the Medieval West*, SPCK, London 1965.

rejection of indiscriminate baptism.¹² Also, a service of Thanksgiving for the Birth of a Child is included in the ASB. In part this was to replace churching, but it was also to be used as an option to offer to those who were viewed as not practising Christians or regular church members. While the early literature suggests that this is not an alternative to baptism,¹³ 'me thinks they do protest too much'. It may be that the rite of thanksgiving was not written as an alternative to the sacrament of baptism. In practice, however, it was used as a pastoral alternative in some parishes: all had to have thanksgivings before baptism, hoping that many would be satisfied with the thanksgiving and not pursue baptism. Curiously this is reinforced by the thanksgiving being put in the initiation section of the ASB. There seems to be no justification given for this unless some people did construe thanksgiving as initiatory. The 'unifying' theory, however, begins to crumble with a second consideration. Fisher shows that retaining episcopal confirmation, as a second rite, was only one alternative. The East, and parts of the Christian West, delegated the whole rite to the presbyter. The episcopal link was kept in some places by the oil blessed by the bishop for initiation. Thus today the local priest in the Orthodox Church leads the whole rite of baptism and the child will be given communion in order to complete initiation. Anglicans regard this as sufficient, such that the Orthodox will be received into the Anglican Church and not be asked to get confirmed. In Roman Catholicism, the bishop may delegate confirmation to the local priest, a part of which is to use episcopally blessed oil (chrism). However, pastoral questions arise from the ASB text. For example, why does an adult candidate for baptism need to be confirmed? While children are baptised there is a strong case for catechesis and confirmation as a profession of faith (the Reformation position). Adult candidates, however, make their own profession (after instruction). What does confirmation add? Putting the services together only hides the question, and perhaps pushes the bishop into performing the more theologically doubtful part of the service, the confirmation.

Common Worship Initiation Services

It is important to look at the contents page of the 1998 *Common Worship Initiation Services* book. This book is divided into two sections. The first section is called 'Holy Baptism'. The first service here is 'Holy Baptism at the Eucharist', which is followed by its derivatives. This service is a service for both adults and infants. In it there is a commission for those who have brought children, which includes the children coming to confirmation. However, there appears to be nothing to stop adults from going straight on to receiving holy communion. Indeed, in parishes with communion before confirmation there would seem to be nothing to stop infants also receiving. It is only in the second part of the book that there is a unified rite: 'Eucharist with Baptism and Confirmation'. However, the first service in this section also includes, 'Reception into the Church of England', and 'Affirmation of Baptismal Faith'. These are clearly pastoral rites, both of them being operable without a bishop, and provision for this eventuality is included separately. What is this saying about the importance of confirmation?

Common Worship has also developed the optional use of oils in baptism. The ASB allowed oil at the signing with the cross at baptism and at confirmation. Working from

12 See C.O. Buchanan, *Baptismal Discipline*, Grove Ministry and Worship No. 3, Grove Books, Bramcote 1972.

13 For example, C.H.B. Byworth CHB and J.A. Simpson, *A Service of Thanksgiving and Blessing*, Grove Booklet on Ministry and Worship No. 5, Grove Books, Bramcote 1972.

the oils set aside by prayer on Maundy Thursday, in the ASB the oil of catechumens is appropriate at the signing with the cross prior to baptism and chrism at confirmation. *Common Worship* adds to this the option of using chrism after baptism.¹⁴

So where does this lead us? The Orthodox who are 'received' into Anglicanism are regarded as confirmed because of their baptismal chrismation. There are now members of the Church of England (and other Provinces) who were chrismated at baptism. Do they need to be confirmed?

One of the key theories behind the *Common Worship* services is 'sacramental initiation is complete in baptism'. The whole quest to find something sacramentally initiatory in confirmation is theologically doomed. Indeed, baptism is sacramental initiation.

The wider Anglican Communion context

Lambeth 1968 had recommended that 'each province... be asked to explore the theology of baptism and confirmation... and to experiment in this regard'. The report of the working section had recommended that 'Holy Communion and Confirmation would be separated' and confirmation was to become a rite of adult commitment.¹⁵ This led to experiments in communion before confirmation, catechumenate, thanksgiving for the birth of a child, and the relationship between baptism and the Eucharist. An examination of the position in ECUSA might illuminate some of this development.

1971 *Services for Trial Use* preceded the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* of ECUSA. The baptismal provision in this book was very radical.¹⁶ There was one service of Holy Baptism with Laying-on-of-Hands. The opening rubric says that 'normally the bishop will be the chief minister at this service; but a priest may act for him in his absence' (in fact the authorisation for trial use says that only the bishop may preside at this trial service). The prayer after baptism, based on Is. 11:2, is said over the candidate, followed by a hand-laying with the making of the sign of the cross (with optional chrism). The rubrics make clear that either a bishop or a priest may say the prayer and do the action. The only prayer reserved to the bishop is the consecration of chrism (which is optional). The service continues with the peace and the Eucharist. In this very radical provision, confirmation was potentially delegated to the presbyter (in the absence of the bishop). There was no other provision for separate confirmation in the *Services for Trial Use*.

The 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* in ECUSA modified this by adding to the baptismal rite prayers for confirmation by the bishop, and prayers for reception and reaffirmation. Confirmation is also included separately in Pastoral Offices. The introduction to the service makes plain that 'Holy Baptism is full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ's Body the Church'. Confirmation is a pastoral rite, not a part of sacramental initiation. Episcopalians had already broken the link between confirmation and the reception of communion.¹⁷ They also wanted to break the link between confirmation and initiation. Episcopal hand-laying is a pastoral rite for those

14 Church of England, *Common Worship: Initiation Services*, CHP, London 1998, p 17.

15 See D. Holeyton, 'Christian Initiation: An Ongoing Agenda for Anglicanism', in D. Holeyton (ed.), *Growing in Newness of Life Christian initiation in Anglicanism today*, The Anglican Book Centre, Toronto 1993, p 15.

16 ECUSA, *Services for Trial Use*, Church Hymnal Corporation, New York 1971.

17 See, L. Weil, 'American Perspectives: (iii) Confirmation', in C.O. Buchanan, *Nurturing Children in Communion*, Grove Liturgical Study No. 44, Grove Books 1985, pp 20-21.

baptised as children (though, again, they compromised and said that baptised adults should also be confirmed, if the bishop was not present at their baptism).

The Anglican Church of Canada in 1985 introduced *The Book of Alternative Services*. This has taken a similar line to ECUSA with confirmation, reception, and reaffirmation included. Confirmation as a separate rite is included in Episcopal services. *A New Zealand Prayer Book* (1989) also makes clear that baptism is full initiation and makes provision for confirmation and renewal in a baptism.

It should be pointed out that in all of these Provinces the reception of communion before confirmation is common. Confirmation has become a pastoral profession of faith before the bishop. It is not a gateway to receiving communion. The impact of children receiving communion before confirmation has been to increase the age of confirmation and make it more a service for adults.

Anglican liturgists, meanwhile, have been discussing the theology of baptism and confirmation. The 1985 Boston Statement recommended 'that since baptism is the sacramental sign of full incorporation into the church, all baptized persons be admitted to communion' and that 'each Province clearly affirm that confirmation is not a rite of admission to communion'.¹⁸ The Toronto statement of the IALC (1991) developed these declarations to say that:

- The renewal of baptismal practice is an integral part of mission and evangelism
- Baptism is complete sacramental initiation and leads to participation in the Eucharist.
- Confirmation and other rites of affirmation have a continuing pastoral role but are in no way to be seen as
 - A completion of baptism *or*
 - Necessary for admission to communion
- The pastoral rite of confirmation may be delegated by the bishop to a presbyter.¹⁹

Clearly the only suggested rite to include all these points was the 1971 *Services for Trial Use*. Other Provinces have included part of this agenda, e.g. it should be remembered that the Church of South India has always allowed presbyteral confirmation. The Scottish Episcopal Church has tried to include these points in a proposed baptismal text. The rubrics suggest that although it is normal for a bishop to be the president of the service, it is not essential.²⁰ Indeed, the Diocese of Sydney has advocated presbyteral confirmation to its synod.²¹

Future directions for England

Anglicans now have a variety of approaches to baptism and confirmation. We are in the twilight of the Victorian pattern. Baptism needs to be seen as integral to the mission of the church, confirmation as a pastoral rite. *Common Worship Initiation Services* needs to be put in this wider context. This helps to explain the two halves

18 Buchanan, *Nurturing Children*, p 49.

19 See, D. Holeton (ed.), *Growing in Newness*.

20 See www.scotland.anglican.org/liturgy/holy-baptism-2005/

21 See www.sydney.anglican.asn.au/synod/Synod2005/

[AdminConfirmationByPresbyters.htm](#) for the report and www.sydneyanglicans.net/sydneystories/confirmation_reform_next_step_australia for the recent Synod decision to move forward in this direction.

of the book. While the 1997 policy of the Church of England's bishops was to reaffirm baptism, confirmation, and communion, they have also opened the door to baptism followed by communion with confirmation later.²² Meanwhile, the General Synod, in *Common Worship Initiation Services*, has approved services that imply the Church of England norm is baptism (at any age) followed by communion (also at any age). Confirmation has been put alongside two other rites that are clearly pastoral and able to be delegated to a presbyter. One of the problems with the introduction of *Common Worship* has been that many have used it as a modified ASB, going to the second section where there appears to be a unified rite and following the same pattern as previously. There has been little exploration of parish services of Affirmation of Faith led by the vicar; indeed many may not realise that this is a possibility. While there have been moans about the language of the baptismal rite, there is a need to grasp the implicit radical agenda, which is seen in the wider Anglican context.

Initiation Services will undoubtedly be revised, and at that point perhaps we should take a lead from other Provinces and put confirmation into a non-initiatory section of our provision i.e. into *Pastoral Services*, alongside Reception and Affirmation of Faith. This would mean that we could take the position that adults who are baptised need not be confirmed (as is now true in Canada), and confirmation could be seen as the point of adult profession of faith for those baptised as infants. This will probably take place at young adult age, as communion before confirmation becomes more common.

The argument for exclusively holding to episcopal confirmation seems to be weakening. CSI has allowed, in theory, presbyteral confirmation since its beginning, although it rarely happens in practice. We are now in full communion, through Porvoo, with churches where presbyteral confirmation is the norm (even in these episcopal churches). Ecumenical considerations may change the position in England further, not least in response to the proposed Covenant with the Methodist Church. Anglican liturgists have already suggested the possibility of presbyteral confirmation.²³ Perhaps at baptism with confirmation, the bishop should perform the baptisms and preside at the Eucharist while the local presbyter confirms the candidates? The bishop then presides at the sacrament of initiation and the sacrament of fellowship while the presbyter performs the pastoral rite of confirmation for those baptised as children.

Is this weakening the role of the bishop? Episcopal diaries seem to be full of confirmation services and these are often seen as evangelistic opportunities. However, the candidates have (we hope) already been evangelised and catechised. What might be more significant would be for bishops' time to be freed up such that they could become leaders of parish missions, leading initiation, baptism and eucharist, at the conversion of people. Confirmation could then be a pastoral rite for those baptised as infants, led by bishop or presbyter. This is the logical outcome of what the Common Worship services have unleashed.

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22 House of Bishops, *Admission of Baptised Persons to Holy Communion before Confirmation. Guidelines by the House of*

Bishops, GS Misc 488, General Synod, London 1997.

23 D.R. Holeton (ed.), *Growing in Newness*.