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Confirmation in Relation to Holy Communion

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THIS title indicates a very proper sub-division of the main subject under consideration. But it may be misleading if it makes us try to get to grips too quickly with secondary issues. As it stands it gives too much prominence to the sacramental. If we are to appreciate these things aright we need to stand back and see them against a larger background; we need to relate them on the one hand to the Gospel of Christ, and on the other to the moral response of the believer.

The recurring need in every generation is to confront our young people not primarily with Confirmation and Holy Communion and so with the Bishop and the priest, whom some make so indispensable to these rites, but rather with the Christ of the Gospel and the urgent challenge to personal faith in Him.

Here we can learn from the mission field overseas. (I speak as one who has worked for six years in China.) As Christian witnesses we do not confront the heathen with an ecclesiastical and a sacramental system and say, 'You must acknowledge our Bishop, and receive our sacraments'. We confront them with the Gospel,—the preached word—and with the Christ of the Gospel, and we call upon them to acknowledge and to receive Him. We invite to faith, in response to the word preached, and only when we are sure of its active presence do we invite to participation in the Sacraments.

This primary importance of faith in active response to present preaching of the Word is also stressed in Article xix. It is only in a company, where faith is thus actively responding, that there is any place for the Sacraments to be administered. Sacraments are, therefore, subordinate and subservient. They are introduced, on the one hand, to endorse the word preached, and visibly to express the Divine donation of grace. They are introduced, on the other hand, to provide responding faith with an outward means of expressing present appropriation. If this personal response of faith towards Christ is not present, participation in the Sacraments is out of place, and may become a deception or a substitute for the real thing rather than a help to spiritual enrichment. Whereas, if only faith is present, as the rubric after "The Communion of the Sick" makes so plain, it is possible to feed on Christ without partaking of the Sacrament with the mouth. The question, therefore, of primary importance, before individuals should be welcomed to the Holy Communion, is the question whether they have responsive faith actively functioning in their hearts.

It is significant that in all our Prayer Book services the would-be participant is made answerable; and it is only to those who have professed the present response of repentance and faith that the Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion are administered. Further, the

plain teaching of the New Testament is that salvation, new birth, and the gift of the Spirit are primarily gifts of God to be enjoyed by direct faith in Christ. The sacrament and the human minister simply serve to confirm one in the possession of gifts which God gives to faith.

With regard to Confirmation, therefore, my contention is that the thing of primary importance in the Order of Confirmation, as we have it in our Prayer Book, is the personal confession of faith made by the candidate. Even in Infant Baptism this response has to be made in the candidate's name, so that by proxy the infant says, in effect, 'I repent', 'I believe', 'I will obey'. It is only of a candidate thus professing repentance and faith that the minister says after baptism, 'This child is regenerate'. For we can, according to New-Testament teaching, only be sure that a person is regenerate, when he has himself believed. Nor is it good enough that profession of faith should be merely formal and by proxy. The protest of the Baptists is understandable, and has often been necessary. But the Prayer Book gives the proper answer. The Catechism recognises that repentance and faith are necessary, and that if those baptized in infancy would enjoy the promises pledged to them in baptism they are, when they come of age, bound to perform the conditions of benefit.

The primary stress of confirmation is, therefore, on the response of the candidate. In this matter public opinion in the country is more right than much ecclesiastical emphasis. For "to obey is better than sacrifice". The moral response of the candidate to Christ, his personal profession of faith in Christ, is more important than the due performance of the ritual act by the Bishop. Further, this interpretation is confirmed by the rubric which says, "And there shall none be admitted to the Holy Communion until such time as he be confirmed, or be ready and desirous to be confirmed". The addition of this last clause—ready and desirous to be confirmed—makes plain that the minimum indispensable qualification for admission to Holy Communion is not the laying on of hands but the individual's readiness publicly to confess his own faith in Christ.

In contrast to this, it is very disappointing and indeed alarming to find that the Confirmation Report or Schedule makes no satisfying mention of the activity of personal faith. It says that ratification of the baptismal vows is purely voluntary and not essential. It desires to dissipate the so-called widespread misunderstanding that the "confirming" of the Baptismal vows is the all-important thing in Confirmation. It descends to suggesting that what should be the confession of the essential qualification for membership in Christ should be made a legal qualification for membership in the councils of the Church. It even suggests that failure to ratify the vows does not call into question any confirmed person's right to communicant status. In other words, communicant status can be sacramentally conferred without any question being asked about the moral condition of the individual. If we tread such a road we may next expect to write 'Ichabod' over the so-called Church. We shall be in the condition of those who have a name to live and are dead. For the primary secrets of spiritual vitality are not sacraments but faith, not Bishops but Christ. The just shall live by faith. Christ is able to save to the uttermost all who come unto God by Him.

Next, let us consider another possible criterion of communicant status. Those who come to the Communion ought to be those who have received the Spirit; they ought to be born again from above. This, in the days of the Acts of the Apostles, was the recognised mark of the true Christian. But how are we to be sure whether an individual has received the Spirit? Some would answer, By getting a Bishop to lay on his hands and pray. This is not the primary New Testament answer. We ought rather to say, by leading the individual to turn in penitence to Christ, and to put his trust in Him. As John the Baptist foretold, the Spirit is the distinctive gift of the Christ. It is He alone, the glorified Lord, who baptizes with the Holy Ghost. It is, therefore, His exclusive prerogative to add new members by spiritual birth to the family of the Church.

In the days of the early Church, if the Apostles wanted to make sure whether people were genuine members of the fellowship, they looked for the grace of Christ and the gifts of the Spirit in their lives. When they saw these manifested, as Barnabas did at Antioch, they acknowledged their oneness in Christ, gave them the right hand of fellowship, and said in effect, God bless you. The incident at Samaria, recorded in Acts viii, was abnormal. Here there was concern because the Spirit had not been received. Clearly it was expected that if individuals believed and were baptized they would receive the Spirit; unless, as some probably thought at this stage, because they were Samaritans, they were not meant to share the blessings of the Messiah. What happened in their case was therefore (as I understand it) a special providence, meant as much for the enlightenment of Peter and John as for the blessing of the Samaritan believers, and making plain in a marked way that Samaritans were meant to share in the gift of the Spirit just as much as Jews.

Again, if we consider the incident in Ephesus recorded in Acts xix, we find that when Paul doubted whether certain professed disciples had received the Spirit he did not say to them, 'Can it be that no Apostle has laid his hands on you?' He asked rather, 'Did you receive the Holy Ghost when you believed?' And when they said, 'No', Paul said in effect, not 'You ought to be confirmed', but 'Your faith cannot then be Christian faith'. For he asked them, 'Into what then were you baptized?' What mattered was not who administered the sacrament, but the confession of faith into which they were initiated. The remedy was to preach to them the Gospel, and to lead them to believe in Christ, and to receive baptism in His Name. The laying on of hands was but the crowning act of faith and prayer,—as though Paul said, Now, if you have believed in Christ, we may be sure that God will give you the Spirit; and He did. This is the consistent attitude of St. Paul,—that when men believe in Christ they are immediately sealed as His by His gift of the Spirit. The Galatian Christians, he implies, received the Spirit by the hearing of faith not by the works of the law nor by the observance of ritual.

This means, therefore, that we may be sure that young people, who were baptized in infancy, have entered into the vital experience of new life in the Spirit only when they make the personal response of faith to Christ. Therefore, when, in the Confirmation service, as we now have it, they confess that they have made this response of faith their

own, it becomes the company of the faithful, acting through their minister, to recognise that, because of their personal faith now publicly confessed, these individuals can rightly be regarded as those who really have the Spirit. So the Bishop lays his hands on them to assure them that in turning to Christ in penitent faith they have done all that God asks. He, therefore, certifies them by this sign of God's favour and gracious goodness towards them. And, believing that they therefore already have the consequent gift of the Spirit, because they have believed, the Bishop prays not that the gift may be given in an initial way here and now, but that they may daily increase in the Spirit more and more, and be given those gifts of wisdom and understanding, which are the characteristics of Christian maturity. There is, therefore, surely a wrong emphasis in praying, as we so often hear done, for those 'who are seeking the gift of the Spirit by the laying on of hands.' We ought rather, when we pray for confirmation candidates, to pray for those who are going publicly to confess their faith in Christ, that their response towards Christ may be genuine and enduring, that they may be established of God in His service, and that God Himself by His Spirit would complete unto the end that work of grace which He has already begun in their hearts.

The new character conferred on sinful men by the Gospel of Christ is a new life of true personal moral responsibility. The sinner, otherwise bound by sin, is offered a new freedom to make a decision and a response towards God. To stress this is not Pelagian. It is rather to marvel at the Divine grace that alone makes this new response possible. But, since by grace response is possible, those who would share in the fellowship must make it. Those only truly belong to the 'Ecclesia', who have personally responded to the Divine 'klesis'. We cannot be reinstated as true sons in our Father's house until we make our active answer; until, like the returning prodigal, by our own conviction and choice, we come to ourselves and return to our Father to confess sin, to trust Him to make us something new, and to desire to spend our days in His company and in His service.

The great need of our churches is this true conversion towards God of those who have grown up within them. Christ Himself said such conversion is indispensable. Without it there is no entry into the kingdom. It is as necessary for those baptized in infancy as for the heathen. In the mission field overseas or in home evangelism among complete outsiders, Christian workers seek rightly for evidences of true conversion before desiring participation in Baptism and Holy Communion. It is serious indeed if we have a higher and truer standard for those thus brought in from outside as adults than for our own children brought up as they should be within the continual influence of the Church's teaching. Surely Confirmation and preparation for it, if rightly used, can provide, as many Evangelical clergy could testify, a unique opportunity to bring this issue to a head in young lives?

Also, since such response Godward involves moral decision, those who have made it can, when they become communicants, rightly be regarded as morally responsible people. This, at least, is the New Testament conception of Church membership. Such members can each and all be expected to have powers of moral judgment; so that affairs can be referred to the whole membership of the local congrega-

tion for moral decision. Such communicants can rightly be expected to be able to examine themselves, to discern the Lord's body, to be aware of the inconsistency of drinking the cup of the Lord and the cup of devils. They are, or ought to be, those who, if such need arise, can rightly be excommunicated for moral delinquency. This kind of responsibility can obviously only be carried by those who know and are ready openly to confess where they stand in relation to Christ and His Gospel. Surely, therefore, young people ought not to be admitted to the Communion until they have come to an awareness of the importance of personal moral decision and, what is more, made their own. Also, if changes are to be made, it seems desirable that in the Order of Confirmation more should be made of the confession of faith and opportunity given, as to the bride in the marriage service, for each individual to answer singly and for himself alone.

Because such standards of communicant membership have not been inculcated and upheld the majority of the laity have a very weak sense of personal moral responsibility as Christians. It is impossible to stir their conscience to shoulder burdens, which they ought to carry. They leave such things far too much to the clergy or to the zealous few. Also, in the wider spheres of the community and the nation, there are directions in which the sense of moral responsibility and the determination to refuse the evil and to choose the good is all too weak. May not the fault lie in part with the Christian Church, because we have been tending to make participation in the fellowship too easy?

Perhaps one may suggest the analogy of marriage. There is a proper order of progress into married union. First, it is of primary importance that the two individuals concerned should be fully aware of the solemn and far-reaching character of the step which they are taking. They ought properly to count the cost and to make a free responsible personal decision, recognising that once committed to it, it shuts out all other alternative partners, and involves them in the obligations of a life-long loyalty to the one partner of their choice. Second, it is right that this decision should be publicly confessed before God and a congregation, and consequent recognition given of their married state with prayer for God's increasing blessing on their union. Third, it is now permissible and indeed proper for them to live together and to enjoy all the intimacies of intercourse and fellowship.

The parallel with the subject which we have under consideration is obvious. Christ is the Bridegroom who in utter grace and absolute faithfulness offers to make us His. One baptized in infancy is like one betrothed by his parents, but one without whose full personal consent the intended relationship cannot be publicly confirmed in marriage. Personal decision to respond to the invitation of the Gospel ought therefore to precede Confirmation. Confirmation is like the marriage service in which the candidate, having personally confessed his faith in Christ and pledged his loyalty to Christ, is openly recognised as one of His with prayer for the increasing blessing of His Spirit. Then entrance into the full privileges of Church fellowship follows.

To return to the marriage analogy, it is surely wrong to allow sexual intercourse before marriage, and still worse to suggest that because such intercourse is sacramental its use might help the couple concerned to get to love one another better before they take the marriage vows.

It would surely be equally wrong to allow a couple to be "married" with the blessing of the Church in order to enjoy the intimacies of sexual union on the understanding that they take the marriage vows, if they feel they can, five years later, when they have discovered for themselves what married life involves, and will know better what they are undertaking. The application is obvious. The man in the street may think that we might at least give such methods a trial during an experimental period. Surely a Christian with any conscience would not tolerate them.

In contrast to the undesirable and unnecessary suggested alternatives of the Schedule the present Prayer Book order, if properly used, can make Confirmation an occasion of great significance in a young life. It can literally be like a marriage ceremony bringing to the candidate God-given witness that justifies him in saying of himself, like the newly wed bride can say of herself, I am His, and He is mine. This is the conviction that makes men live differently,—as so many writers on the Old Testament testify of the Israelites,—the solemn God-given conviction that the Lord is my God, and that I am one of His people. If I may give my own testimony, this is how my own confirmation stands out in my own memory,—because, on the day on which I was confirmed, the chapter I was reading from the Bible was 2 Samuel vii., of which the 24th verse reads, Thou hast confirmed to thyself thy people Israel to be a people unto thee forever; and thou, Lord, art become their God.

As things are, if candidates are to be allowed to be confirmed or to become communicants, without any adequate sense of the accompanying moral responsibility, the danger is lest those who ought to consider themselves spiritually married to Christ should spend most of their time, as the prophets of Israel or our Lord would say, living adulterously. We need a new awareness in the Church that one cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of idols without provoking the Lord to jealousy. There is something spiritually unhealthy about enjoying intercourse with the world, or living to self, all the year or all the week, and then expecting, without any sense of inconsistency, to join in the communion of the Lord's Table on Easter Day or on some Lord's day. We cannot "keep only unto Him" without in some real sense "forsaking all other". Nor shall we get a full renewal of spiritual vitality within the body corporate of the Church until we recognise more clearly that some who are nominally married to Christ and yet living in separation from Him and disloyalty to Him ought to be excommunicated.

Communicants will only examine themselves by these higher standards, if they are taught to do so from the start. Therefore, before young people are admitted to the Holy Communion, with all that it implies, they ought to be faced with the challenge to make their choice and to give their answer. I hold strongly, therefore, that it would be wrong to alter the present order so as to allow young people to attend communion before they are sure enough of their personal faith in Christ to be able properly to confess it,—and to confess it not primarily before the Bishop, but rather before God and the congregation of His people. Also, I disagree fundamentally with the statements in the Schedule that in Confirmation the response of the candidate is

secondary and optional. For, if from adult converts to Christianity we rightly expect personal confession of faith before baptism, we ought surely to demand similar confession from our own children before they, too, are properly recognised as members of the Church and consequently admitted to the Holy Communion.

There is one other point worthy of mention. Its underlying truth is forcibly expressed in the vigorous metaphorical words of our Lord Himself—Give not that which is holy to the dogs, neither cast your pearls before the swine, lest haply they trample them under their feet, and turn and rend you. Our Lord clearly meant that if things of value or sacred significance are given to creatures who cannot appreciate their worth and use them rightly, they may not only get no benefit, but also they may in resentful disappointment despise the gift and turn against the givers. A reaction almost of this kind sometimes seems to occur with some who are confirmed and begin to attend Holy Communion. The reason seems to be that false hopes are raised. They are led to expect that participation in these services will, *ipso facto*, do something wonderful; and nothing happens. They are genuinely disappointed. And so they react unfavourably against Church going. We can only hope to prevent such tragic anti-climaxes, and worthily to discharge our stewardship in the Gospel, if young people are adequately taught the true value and right use of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper before they are allowed and encouraged to become communicants. In other words, young people must come to some personal spiritual discernment and to active and confessed repentance and faith before they can be expected with spiritual profit to enter into the meaning and the blessing and the responsibility of participation in the Sacrament of our redemption by Christ's Death.

So I repeat; the primary secrets of spiritual vitality in the Church are not sacraments but faith, not Bishops and priests but Christ. There is continual need in the Christian life afresh to face the insistent challenge to put first things first. If we wish to see an increase in vital enduring communicant membership of the Church what we need to do is not to facilitate the reception of the Holy Communion at an earlier age and with less sense of responsibility, but to concentrate our faith and prayer and effort on leading our young people into true conversion to God and into personal, responsible, penitent and obedient faith in Christ.

An Appendix, not read at the Conference, concerning the admission to the Holy Communion of unconfirmed members of the Free Churches.

This subject, if it is to be treated with true Christian comprehension, must include the question of the admission to the Holy Communion of members of the Free and non-Episcopal Churches, who do not use the Order of Confirmation.

What is to be the criterion here? If some such congregations, like those believers in Samaria mentioned in Acts viii, clearly have not received the Spirit, then we might offer to send to them our Bishops to pray and to lay hands on them, and to see if spiritual transformation followed in their communities. Even this procedure I should oppose as on our part a presumptuous suggestion. The right thing to do, as I

understand it, would be to send to them preachers of the Gospel. But if such congregations are obviously sharing in the same grace of Christ as we are, then we ought to welcome them as they would welcome us to the Table of the one Lord without any insistence on the necessity of episcopal laying on of hands. In other words, "confirmation" in this sense ought not to be made an essential of intercommunion or reunion. The necessary qualification in addition to baptism is the personal confession of faith in Christ as the redeeming Lord on the part of all who partake of the Communion. If some have made this confession as adults in adult baptism, that is enough. Or if others, who were baptized in infancy, have in some other way, to the satisfaction of the congregation to which they belong, approved themselves as true believers in Christ, there is no need to insist on a further confirmation before admission to the Holy Communion.

The nearest parallel to this within our own Episcopal Church is found in the mission field overseas, where adult converts are baptized. Then, if there is to be laying on of hands, it ought ideally to be done at the same time as baptism. Otherwise, to keep such true believers waiting until a Bishop can visit them, and to suggest to them that something more is necessary before they can be welcomed as communicant members of the Church, is, as I understand it, unscriptural and theologically unjustified. Also, it tends in the mission field to cause a wrong emphasis to be put on confirmation to the detriment of baptism. Candidates, concerning whose fitness there is still some uncertainty, are sometimes allowed to be baptized because the minister says to himself, Anyway they cannot become communicants until they have been confirmed. This surely is an improper use of confirmation with those who as adults have already confessed their faith in baptism.

Therefore, in the last analysis, as I see it, the decisive qualification for admission to Holy Communion is not Confirmation in the sense of the laying on of hands by the Bishop but Baptism together with the presence in the life of the individual concerned of an active responsive faith in Christ, and a faith sufficiently taught and developed to understand properly and use profitably the Sacraments as a means of grace. Such faith may of course be professed without being possessed. Beyond a certain point the Church cannot decisively check the things of the heart. But, if such faith is confessed, and if those concerned have satisfied themselves as far as is possible that the elements of the faith are understood, and that there is no moral inconsistency in the life, such ought to be welcomed to the fellowship of the Lord's Table. Indeed, the Order of Confirmation itself might be more welcome to those who join our Church from other Christian Churches, if it was made plain to them that it is not the conferring upon them of a primary essential, which hitherto as Christians they have not possessed, but rather a public acknowledgment of their membership in the family of God, and a prayer for the increasing blessing of the Spirit in their life, granted on the simple condition of their willingness to renew in public profession of response to Christ and His Gospel in repentance, faith and obedience.

The existing rubric in the Prayer Book is, therefore, in essential principle fundamentally right,—that none ought to be admitted to Holy Communion unless, in addition to being baptized, they have

confessed, or are willing to confess, their personal faith in Christ and their active response to His claims in both renunciation of evil and obedience to God's revealed will. In other words, those who become communicants ought to be those who are consciously and continually reckoning themselves dead indeed unto sin and alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord.