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Confirmation in the Early Centuries

BY JAMES HICKINBOTHAM

CONFIRMATION in the Church of England is interpreted broadly in three ways. First, some say that it is the second, the positive, sacrament of Christian initiation : in baptism we are cleansed, our sins are pardoned ; in confirmation the Holy Spirit comes to indwell us ; in baptism He was an outside agent, regenerating us ; in confirmation He gives us His Presence in our hearts. Secondly, some say that while the Holy Spirit was given initially in baptism, in confirmation He is given in fuller measure, or fresh gifts of His are conferred ; baptism is the sacrament of initiation, but confirmation gives extra grace for Christian living and conduct ; it is the "*sacramentum pugnantium*". Thirdly, some say that baptism is the sacrament of initiation which signifies the fulness of salvation ; nothing can be added to it : confirmation is an ancient sign of blessing used originally as a seemly way of concluding the baptism ritual ; and is now used in the case of those baptized in infancy as a sign that when they have professed personal repentance and faith, the whole blessing covenanted to them in their baptism is effectually theirs in a way which in the nature of things could not be the case until they had learnt to respond in faith to the grace of God. Why are there such different interpretations—and which is right ? A look at the New Testament and at the fathers may help us both to see how the confusion has arisen and to find the right answer.

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" He that hath the Son of God hath the life." So St. John. " If any man be in Christ he is a new creature. The old things are passed away. All things are become new." So St. Paul. In the New Testament, salvation is a single whole : you possess it as a whole, or you possess it not at all. You were children of wrath ; you are now children of God ; you did belong to this present evil age ; you have been translated into the Kingdom of God's Son. Hence Christians are those who have been saved—" *sesōsmenoi* ", perfect tense ; a once-for-all act conferring upon them a continuing status and life—the life of the Kingdom. There is nothing more to be given to a Christian than what is already in principle his. For he has been given Christ Jesus, Himself the Son of God, in whom is redemption and sanctification, and every blessing. He that spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him freely give us all things ? A Christian is not, then, to seek a new gift ; he is to be daily appropriating and making his own more and more of the gift which is already his, the gift which contains all other gifts—a personal

relationship with Jesus Christ his Lord and his God. He is to be exploring more and more of his inheritance—the unsearchable riches of Christ. It is in this sense that we are also “being saved”—a continuous activity which will lead on to the complete appropriation of God’s gift of His Son when we “shall be saved” in the Day of Christ. We are becoming what we are; we shall be made then completely what we are.

The gift of salvation is a single whole because it is an eschatological act setting us who were sinners in a personal relationship to the one God. We are adopted as children of the one Father; we are incorporated as members into the one Christ; we are made partakers of the one Spirit, who is the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ. The New Testament faith is through and through Trinitarian. It does not conceive the possibility of a relationship to Christ which is not also a relationship to the Father and to the Spirit. As many as are led by the Spirit they are the children of God; if any man hath not the Spirit of Christ he is none of His. You cannot be reconciled to the Father or incorporated in Christ without receiving the Spirit of adoption which is the Spirit of God’s Son. The New Testament is also personal: you cannot have more or less of God quantitatively. Either you belong to Him as His child and He dwells in you—or not. You may discover more and more about the relationship; and conform your life more and more to it; but it is there—given and complete as the foundation for a life of ever deepening fellowship.

It is therefore natural that the great weight of New Testament teaching affirms that the entrance into this one whole salvation is by a single act; an act which is described in its inward aspect as faith, and in its outward aspect as baptism. Baptism is the outward aspect of justification by faith as chapter 6 of the Epistle to the Romans makes plain. In baptism the believer receives the whole gift of salvation; it is expounded as the sign of cleansing from sin (“arise and wash away your sins”), as the sign of belonging to Christ (baptism is “into” Christ and in His name), as the sign of having died and risen with Him (St. Paul’s favourite line of exposition), as the sign of incorporation in the Body of Christ (“we were all baptized into the one body”), and as the sign of the gift of the Spirit (“and all made to drink of the one Spirit”). “Men and brethren,” they said to Peter after his Pentecostal sermon, “what shall we do?” “Be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.” Alike in theory and in practice the New Testament sets before us the one act of baptism as the way into salvation.

What exactly is this act of baptism? The Gospels open with John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus in Jordan. This not only tells us what sort of thing the word “baptism” conveys—a religious plunging and washing in water—but what Christian baptism means. John’s baptism had in view a future remission of sins and gift of the Spirit. Jesus comes as the one who is to fulfil this promise. Jesus at His baptism was commissioned as Servant and Messiah. As Servant He is to suffer and so procure remission of sins for His people. As Messiah He receives the Spirit which He is to impart to His people. Christian

baptism is thus seen as the incorporation of the believer in Christ, a sharing of His baptism ; and this is a baptism of present gift, not of future promise ; a baptism actually conferring the forgiveness He won for us as Servant, and the Spirit He confers on us as Messiah.

In spite of all this, it has been urged by scholars like Mason, Thornton, and Dix, that water-baptism in the New Testament signified only remission of sins, and that the gift of the Spirit was subsequently conferred by laying on of hands or anointing with oil. We may dismiss as an artificial distorting of language the attempt to interpret such phrases as " born of water and the Holy Ghost " as meaning a water baptism and a spirit baptism as two separate things, the water baptism signifying remission of sins, the Spirit baptism being signified by another rite of unction or hand-laying. In fact they refer to one baptism—of which the Spirit is the inner reality, the water the outward sign. Nor can we take more seriously the claim that the word " baptism " must be taken normally to mean not only water baptism but a whole complex of ceremonies including unction and hand-laying ; so that when the apostles speak of the Holy Spirit as given in baptism they really mean given in confirmation. Nor is the comparison of proselyte baptism as preliminary to circumcision *ad rem*. Christian baptism is founded on Christ's baptism, not on Jewish proselyte ceremonies, and the New Testament compares circumcision to faith, the inward side of baptism, or to baptism itself.

The serious core of the argument is that there are passages in the New Testament which refer to anointing or sealing with the Spirit, which might be thought to suggest that the Spirit is given through a physical anointing, especially as anointing with oil was in patristic times spoken of as sealing with the Spirit ; and that there are passages which suggest that the Spirit is given through laying on of hands. The three texts which affirm that Christians have been sealed with the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 1: 21, Eph. 1: 13, 4: 30) convey the idea that we have been stamped with a mark of ownership, showing we are God's property ; but the contexts do not suggest a physical marking whether by chrism or otherwise ; but rather that the "*arrabôn*" or earnest of the Holy Spirit, given to Christians in response to their faith in Christ, is itself the stamp of God's ownership upon them. There is no indication in the New Testament that any practice of anointing existed ; and such phrases as " Ye have an unction from the Holy One " refer to the " pouring out " of the Spirit on us in our baptism, just as Jesus Himself is said to have been " anointed with the Holy Ghost and with power ". As human kings were anointed with oil, so Jesus the Messiah was metaphorically spoken of as being anointed with the Holy Spirit in His baptism ; and since our baptism is a sharing in His, we likewise receive the Holy Spirit in baptism. The unction and the seal is the Holy Spirit Himself, given to us in baptism.

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There are, however, two places where a laying on of hands is recorded to have intervened between baptism and the coming of the Spirit—the Samaritans who were baptized by Philip, but received the Spirit only when Peter and John came and prayed and laid hands on them

(Acts 8) ; and the disciples of John the Baptist at Ephesus whom Paul instructed and baptized—" and when Paul had laid hands on them they received the Holy Ghost " (Acts 19). The Samaritan affair reads like an exceptional case ; hitherto the Holy Spirit has every time been associated with baptism ; now " the Holy Ghost has fallen upon none of them ; only they had been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus ". This was the first time non-Jews had been admitted to the Church ; and it may well be that both they and Philip felt that, though baptism could not be delayed to believers, their inclusion in the fellowship of the Church needed to be solemnly recognized by an act of prayer and fellowship on the part of the Church's chief pastors and leaders ; and it may well be that the ecstatic marks of the Spirit's presence (which are what Luke specially refers to when he speaks of the Spirit " falling upon " people) were inhibited until this gesture of fellowship finally relieved the Samaritan Christians of all doubts as to their status and their whole-hearted welcome into the household of faith. The instance in Acts 19 reads more casually, as if laying on of hands after baptism is nothing remarkable, and also if there was no interval between the baptism and the hand-laying. It may be there was some special reason for it which Luke did not record ; but it may be that it was not infrequently used as a sign of blessing with which the act of baptism might be suitably rounded off. It would add nothing to the baptism ; but would fitly conclude the service. For it was an ancient sign of blessing, well known in the Old Testament, and used as a sign of blessing and strengthening, of identification and fellowship, and of commissioning. A newly baptized Christian might fitly be welcomed into the Christian fellowship as he emerged new-born from the water, by such a sign of blessing and strengthening, of fellowship in Christ, and of commissioning in His Service. In Heb. 6: 2 the author speaks of the " doctrine of washings and of laying on of hands " as among the elementary principles of the Christian life. It would be unsafe to conclude that he refers to baptism plus laying on of hands in confirmation, because the word used for washings is plural and unusual ; and laying on of hands was used in healing the sick, commissioning to ministerial service, and in other ways as well as a rounding-off of baptism. Probably it is a comprehensive phrase to denote Christian ceremonies in general, though if this is so, it probably was put in this precise form because laying on of hands was often associated with " washings ".

These are the only passages which may imply a custom of laying on of hands in connection with baptism. It would be precarious to build much on texts so few and so obscure. They certainly do not imply a gift of the Holy Spirit through laying on of hands as an addition to the baptismal gift of the Spirit. There is one gift of the Spirit only—a gift which comes either after baptism alone, or after baptism plus laying on of hands. One wonders whether ecclesiastics who use the 1928 Preface to the Confirmation Service, always realize that in invoking the Samaritan incident as the warrant for confirmation they are implying that the candidates have hitherto received no gift of the Spirit at all in their baptism—" the Holy Ghost had fallen upon none of them ; only they had been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus." But neither

do the texts imply that the gift of the Spirit properly belongs to the laying on of hands and not to baptism. In Acts 8 it is the baptismal gift of the Spirit which is at issue ; a gift which (it is implied) normally comes direct upon baptism, but which in this special case was withheld, at any rate in any manifest form. Therefore a further act of prayer and fellowship took place, and at length the baptismal gift was manifestly received. The laying on of hands is not seeking an additional gift besides that associated with baptism ; it is a prayer that the baptism may be effective. In Acts 19 we are not to understand more than an act of blessing and fellowship concluding the baptismal ceremony, and it is as the baptismal ceremony ends with this sign of blessing that the Holy Spirit's coming is made manifest. We cannot be certain of the detailed exegesis of these three obscure texts. What we must not do is to interpret them in a way which runs counter to the whole of the rest of the New Testament evidence, whether theological or historical. Nor is there any need to do so if we take them in their plain sense and do not read back into them the customs of later ages of Church history. The conclusion stands clear, that in the New Testament, whatever occasional ceremonies may have been added here and there to the baptismal rite, it is by the one act of baptism that the wholeness of salvation, which consists of personal identification with the one Lord Jesus Christ, is once for all entered upon by the Christian believer. In this act sins are remitted, we are adopted as children of the Father, we are incorporated in Christ, the fulness of the Spirit is given, and all other blessings assured.

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This conclusion is supported by the scanty evidence, such as it is, for the belief and practice of the Church until well past the middle of the second century. The Apostolic Fathers and the Apologists make no reference to unction or laying on of hands in connection with Christian initiation. For them entrance to salvation is by baptism, and for them as for the New Testament it is baptism in water which is also baptism in the Holy Ghost. Irenaeus is the first father to connect the gift of the Spirit with the laying on of hands, and he only does so as an historical comment on the story in Acts ; he does not refer to it as a contemporary custom, and elsewhere he habitually links the gift of the Spirit with baptism. But no doubt the rite of baptism was becoming adorned during the second century with additional ceremonies such as dignified it when we learn of it from Hippolytus' *Apostolic Tradition*, which perhaps represents Roman custom shortly before the end of the second century—an adornment probably borrowed in part from the example of the Gnostics. The principal additions were unction by the bishop and the laying on of his hand, though they were by no means isolated ceremonies, and at first were not thought of as doing more than emphasizing particular aspects of the meaning of the central act of baptism. The Latin version of the *Apostolic Tradition* (which Professor Lampe regards as the authentic one) is still at this stage. The Holy Spirit is thought of as received in the actual baptism rather than in the unction which follows.

The third century, however, witnessed a break-up both of the liturgy

of baptism and of its theology—and the two processes were connected. The increase of ceremonies naturally caused a tendency to parcel out the baptismal gifts to the different “moments” of the service. But when the Church spread so fast that it became impossible for the bishop to perform all baptisms, presbyters baptized and left unction or laying on of hands to be done later by the bishop. Inevitably this pushed forward the tendency to “parcel out” the baptismal gifts: separated in space and time from baptism, unction or its equivalent became separated theologically, and thought of as conveying a distinct gift of its own. The theory emerges that baptism conveys the negative gift of remission of sins; unction or laying on of hands the positive gift of the Spirit. This is a view which first finds significant expression (save for Gnostic circles) in Origen, Tertullian, and Cyprian; and it is stated in its most extreme form in the tract *De Rebaptismate*. But it is to be noted that all these except the last also cling strongly to the older tradition. There are passages where they connect the gift of the Spirit very closely and directly with baptism; and Cyprian in particular is in conscious protest against the sharp distinction between baptism and confirmation which characterized the Roman side in the controversy about rebaptism. The rebaptism controversy itself pushed forward the distinction between baptism (recognized as valid when conferred in schism) and laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Spirit which was used to reconcile returning schismatics to the Church as well as to complete baptism. In the West, the spread of infant baptism was still further to fragment the baptismal ceremony in practice and give a separate status to confirmation. And a rather superficial, literalistic method of interpreting Scripture led father after father to follow Origen and Tertullian in assuming that the narrative of Acts 8 about the Samaritans must be taken as normal and normative, and as the foundation for the doctrine of confirmation as a sacrament of the Spirit independent of baptism.

Yet it was not so easy to escape either from the older tradition of the Church or from the main drift of New Testament testimony. Nor did the fathers wish to do so. Consequently the rest of the patristic age was marked by great confusion on this matter. The gift of the Spirit is attributed now to baptism, now to unction, now to laying on of hands. There is no great controversy about the subject; indeed one and the same father will sometimes express all three views in different contexts without appearing aware of any inconsistency. It often simply depends on which passage of Scripture he is commenting upon at the moment, and there is no major effort to work out a coherent interpretation of the New Testament evidence as a whole. It was perhaps natural that in this situation some of the later Fathers should begin to grope towards a reconciliation of the apparent contradictions along the line which was to be more fully worked out in the Middle Ages—namely, that there is a gift of the Holy Spirit in baptism, but that there is also a further gift of the Spirit, an augmentation of grace, in confirmation.

Thus in the patristic period we may observe three main theories, though they are seldom held without confusion. Up to 200 the New Testament affirmation that salvation is a single whole entered into

once for all by faith expressed in baptism holds the field. But the addition of ceremonies designed to symbolize certain aspects of the baptismal gift (in itself a harmless dignifying of the ceremony) leads to these aspects being transferred from baptism to the associated ceremonies ; as the ceremonies themselves become separated from baptism their independent status is reinforced, and further bolstered by a naive appeal to the narrative of Acts. Hence the second theory : that the gift of the Spirit belongs to confirmation and not to baptism at all. But the Bible and tradition are too strong for this to be accepted as it stands—baptism is still affirmed to have a gift of the Spirit belonging to it. And so the way is prepared for the third theory : that the Spirit is given initially in baptism, and an increase in grace is given in confirmation.

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What may we conclude from this ? First, I suggest, that confusion arose when the early Church ceased to be controlled in its thinking by the great New Testament principle that salvation is an indivisible whole, received once for all, by receiving Christ Jesus as Lord, and must therefore be received in a single sacrament—that of baptism in which we are joined to the Lord Jesus and made partakers of His baptism of water and the Spirit, and receive all the fruits of the mission to which He was then consecrated as Servant and Messiah. We must preserve this singleness of baptism, because it witnesses to the eschatological decisiveness of Christ's salvation whereby we have been translated out of darkness into the Kingdom of God's Son, and because it witnesses to the personal character of that salvation. It is a relationship to God in Christ by the Spirit ; and God in the last resort gives not gifts but Himself : you cannot have remission of sins without having God, and you cannot have God without Christ ; you cannot have Christ without having the Holy Spirit ; nor can you have God quantitatively, more or less of the Holy Spirit. Everything is given in baptism, because God is given ; we may neither defer the gift of the Spirit altogether to confirmation nor affirm that He is only partly given in baptism. Secondly, we cannot affirm that any additional ceremony, laying on of hands or unction, is strictly theologically necessary for the fulness of Christian salvation. But, thirdly, we are to be thankful that the early Church continued or revived the use of the laying on of hands in connection with baptism, and more particularly in connection with baptism when it became customary to baptize infants. For though in baptizing infants the early Church seized upon the New Testament affirmation that the children of Christians are properly within the Church, and baptism is the only biblical way of entering the Church, it remains true that the fully effectual receiving of the baptismal gifts depends upon the personal response of faith to the gracious redeeming love of God in Christ—and this the infant cannot have. The early Church opened up the way for the Reformers to use this ancient sign of blessing and strengthening, of identification and fellowship, and of commissioning to service, as a sign and assurance to those baptized in infancy that, now they have made their own response of faith to Christ, the whole of the salvation pledged to them in their baptism is fully and

effectually theirs. They do not receive the Spirit for the first time ; they do not receive a gift of the Spirit not included in the baptismal gift ; they receive in a rite hallowed by biblical and ecclesiastical usage the assurance of Christ in and through His Church that the gift of the Spirit covenanted in baptism, and all other aspects of salvation covenanted in baptism, are now fully and effectually entered upon and enjoyed by them as those who have now personally fulfilled the condition on which baptism was given them, that of repentance and faith. To them fittingly the Church gives the rite which symbolizes the baptismal gift of blessing and strengthening with the Holy Spirit, of fellowship in Christ's Body, and of commission to serve Him in the world.

This seems to me to be the doctrine which is theologically most consistent with the New Testament doctrine of salvation, and with that of the earliest age of the fathers, as well as with the practice of New Testament and primitive times. It also appears to be the doctrine implied by the confirmation rite of the Book of Common Prayer. The 1928 rite seems to move towards a doctrine of a baptismal gift of the Spirit which is followed by a further gift of the Spirit at confirmation ; while the rite proposed by the Liturgical Commission seems to move towards the belief that though the Spirit is the external agent of baptism, there is no gift of His indwelling given in baptism ; and that this is wholly given in confirmation. If this is so, there is ground for uneasiness lest these rites should give renewed currency to two theories of confirmation which are ill at ease with the New Testament, find little support in the earlier part of the age of the fathers, and were excluded by our Church at the Reformation from its formulations both of doctrine and of liturgy.
