

Historical Overview of Confirmation

Apostolic Age:

- Christian baptism is a complete and adequate entrance into a new relationship with the Father, the Messiah and the Holy Spirit, becoming a full member of the new Church. Households were baptized together, including slaves and children. If children could not answer the questions of renunciation and commitment for themselves, others answered for them¹.
- The newly baptized emerged from the water and (in many parts of the church) were anointed, usually over the entire body. Being marked with the sign of the cross with oil, a part of the rite called consignation, the newly baptized were then re-clothed (later in the era they received white garments). Being brought into the Eucharistic assembly for the first time, they shared in the kiss of peace and the people's prayers, made their own offering of bread and wine, and received the Body and Blood of Christ.
- Baptism was seen as a water moment of the washing from sin and a cleansing act of forgiveness. The anointing, a representation of the rich, flowing life of the Spirit,² was a sealing of the gift of the Holy Spirit, being marked as Christ's own forever.
- The conveying of responsibility by the laying on of hands was also an ancient practice existing in Israel; it was a regular and agreed upon method of either transferring or shifting responsibility in the community. This custom predates Exodus, and following this laying of on hands, or public binding, a participation in a common meal as a form of communion with the divine ancestor was shared. Many of these Jewish customs found their way into the initiation rites of the early Church.
- While the water ritual was the central part of baptism and was seen as the act of initiation, the laying on of hands, the "stirring up" of the Spirit, had an eschatological quality.³

Church Fathers:

- Converts to Christianity were being made almost exclusively from the ranks of pagans, so a period of preparation for baptism became an important rule: renouncing Satan and confessing the faith of Christ. There was a period of catechesis in which the story of Jesus Christ was shared, as well as the teachings of the apostles and prayers of the people. This preparation took place over a period of time prior to the celebration of Easter when all new converts were baptized into the Church.
- Following their baptism, the new Christians were welcomed into the household of faith and participated in the community meal, the Eucharist.
- *Tertullian* (c. 155-220) (Carthage) – the washing as cleansing and blessing of our bodies so that the imposition of hands can invite the coming of the Holy Spirit. He speaks of the Spirit's resting on the waters of baptism, being active throughout the rite.⁴ For him, it is not the water but the "seal" which imparts the Spirit, being given by the bishop. The whole rite remains one service, and its "minister" is the Bishop.

¹ Daniel B. Stevick, *Baptismal Moments: Baptismal Meanings* (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1987), 9.

² Charles P. Price, "Appendix – Occasional Paper Number Four – Rites of Initiation" *Baptism & Ministry: Liturgical Studies I* (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1994), 96.

³ Edward N. West, "The Rites of Christian Initiation in the Early Church," *Confirmation: History, Doctrine and Practice* ed. Kendig Brubaker Cully (Greenwich, CT: The Seabury Press, 1962), 9.

⁴ Donald J. Parsons, "Some Theological and Pastoral Implications of Confirmation" *Confirmation Re-Examined*, 48.

- *Hippolytus* (c. 17-236) *Apostolic Tradition* (Rome)⁵ – thanksgiving over oil of thanksgiving, exorcism of oil of exorcism, renunciation of Satan, anointing with oil of exorcism by a presbyter, affirmation of a creed, baptism in water, anointing with oil of thanksgiving by a presbyter. Following their baptism, drying themselves and being newly vested, the neophytes are brought into the church. At the end of the rite the bishop laid a hand on each of the candidates, in prayer.⁶ Sponsors spoke on behalf of children who were too young to speak for themselves. Infant candidates are baptized, confirmed and communicated at one sacramental action with the bishop present, just as adult candidates are initiated into the Christian community.
- *Cyprian* (c. 200-258), Bishop of Carthage, believed in the presence and power of the Spirit in Baptism, but the Spirit was given and received by the power of the laying on of hands.⁷
- *Ambrose of Milan* (340-397) speaks of a “spiritual seal” and a “perfecting” or invocation of the Holy Spirit and its gifts on the neophytes, which takes place after the post-baptismal anointing and foot washing.⁸ (This northern Italian practice began the Western theory that confirmation is the “completion” of baptism.⁹)
- *Jerome* (c. 347-420) writes of his distress that presbyters and deacons in churches that are far from the bigger cities have baptized many without the bishop’s presence.¹⁰
- *John Chrysostom* (347-407) describes the rites of Antioch as having no anointing following baptism; it is in the water that the Holy Spirit descends on the baptized “through the words and hands of the priest.”¹¹
- In different regions of the church the newly baptized received a signing with the cross (Milan, Rome, Spain, and North Africa), a laying on of hands (Rome and North Africa), a second anointing by the bishop (Rome) and even in some places *pedilavium*, or foot washing (Milan and Spain)¹².
- *Augustine* (354-430) – Christian preparation took place through worship, biblical preaching, and reading Scripture aloud. Catechumens continued to go through a lengthy period of instruction in the faith. The hand laying and bishop’s participation were viewed as a pastoral presence, not to be seen as a completion of the full initiation rite of the water baptism.

Post-Councils

- *Riez* in 439 and *Orange* in 441 – *confirmare* or *perficere* are used in reference to particular rites associated with the ministry of bishops in baptismal initiation,¹³ involving the imposition of hands with prayer for the Holy Spirit.
- *Innocent I* reinterpreted the *missa* as to be a ceremonial gesture of signation on the forehead of the neophytes.¹⁴
- *Alcuin* (Gaul) – The chalice “completes” the eating of the consecrated bread, or, as with Alcuin, the bread and cup “confirms” the participants.¹⁵

⁵ Price, *Liturgical Studies* 1, 88.

⁶ Paul Turner, *Source of Confirmation: From the Fathers through the Reformation* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 12-13.

⁷ Allen F. Bray, III, “Baptism and Confirmation: A Relationship of Process” *Confirmation Re-Examined*, 49.

⁸ Kavanagh, 53.

⁹ West, 10.

¹⁰ Fisher, 127.

¹¹ Stevick, *Baptismal Moments: Baptismal Meanings*, 9.

¹² Johnson, 157 and Stevick, *Baptismal Moments: Baptismal Meanings* 9.

¹³ Johnson, 142.

¹⁴ Kavanagh, 69.

- *Faustus of Riez* (semi-Pelagian bishop (southern Gaul) Pentecost sermon (around 450) In baptism we are washed; after baptism we are strengthened. And although the benefits of rebirth suffice immediately for those about to die, nevertheless the helps of confirmation are necessary for those who will prevail. Rebirth in itself immediately saves those needing to be received in the peace of this blessed age. Confirmation arms and supplies those needing to be preserved for the struggles and battles of this world.¹⁶ Confirmation should be deferred until a suitable maturity had been attained.
- 6th – 9th C – the Romanizing and sacramentalizing of Hispano-Gallican practices of episcopal disciplinary oversight of baptism became known as “confirmation of neophytes.”¹⁷
- *Rabanus Maurus* (d. 835), Bishop of Mainz – “episcopal chrismation and laying on of hands brings the grace of the Spirit into the Baptized with all the fullness of sanctity, power and knowledge.”¹⁸ His rite also contained a rite of confirmation to be celebrated at a later time. The length of time between the two parts of initiation (baptism and confirmation) grew longer.
- *Pseudo-Isidore*, compiler of the *False Decretals*, took parts of Faustus’ sermon and attributed them to Melchiades and Urban I, popes who lived (and died) during church persecutions in the early fourth century¹⁹.
- 8th – 12th C the rite of initiation consisted of baptism, confirmation and first communion being three parts of one whole, not always experienced at the same moment with each additional rite adding new strength to the individual.
- 11th C – in many areas infants ceased to receive communion; the age of seven became a standard as the “age of discretion.”

The Middle Ages

- *Thomas Aquinas* (*Summa Theologica III3a.72.8*) - confirmation is a “sacrament of maturity,” bringing an increase of grace for a different phase of life²⁰. In Baptism, the Holy Spirit worked externally for regeneration and adoption; in Confirmation, the Holy Spirit was an internal effect that strengthened for Christian discipleship, allowing the presence (given at Baptism) to become more effective. This increase of grace (*augmentium gratiae*) gave strength (*robur*) to live and fight the battles of the Christian life, or spiritual warfare (*confirmamur ad pugnam*).²¹ The kiss of peace at the end of the ceremony was replaced with a slap on the cheek,²² a Roman practice closely associated with medieval guild practice used in commissioning and sending forth journeymen. Here emerged a distinct rite, separate from baptism, as a sacrament of the Holy Spirit for an increase of grace, strength to live and fight the battles of the Christian life, a sacrament of maturity. This reflects a synthesis of the Roman episcopal post-baptismal rites of hand laying with prayer and anointing and the Spanish-Gallican practice of episcopal oversight and supervision of baptism called “confirmation.”

¹⁵ Quinn, 362.

¹⁶ Johnson, 146.

¹⁷ Kavanagh, 69.

¹⁸ Bray, 49.

¹⁹ Fisher, 135.

²⁰ Price, *Liturgical Studies 1*, 89.

²¹ Charles U. Harris, “The Anglican Understanding of Confirmation” *Confirmation: History, Doctrine and Practice*, 21.

²² Hill, 284.

- *Council of Cologne* (1280) it was declared that children under seven were too young to be confirmed, because one should learn the rudiments of faith in preparation: the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ave Maria. Confirmation was being changed from being a sacrament of initiation to one with catechetical dimensions associated with an appropriate age.
- *John Peckham*, Archbishop of Canterbury (1282 canon) required that Confirmation be the prerequisite to receiving communion. His aim was to rescue Confirmation from "damnable negligence" because bishops were not visiting parishes for Confirmation. It had the opposite effect.
- *Council of Florence* (1439) – *Decree for the Armenians*, officially stated that in confirmation Christians grow in grace and are strengthened in faith.²³ The "age of discretion" was the key to a child's admittance to communion

The Reformation

- *The Protestant Reformation* returned to the understanding that baptism was complete in and of itself; there was new birth in water and the Holy Spirit. The seal of grace at baptism is the pouring out of grace of the Holy Spirit.²⁴
- A *catechism* became the official and common vehicle of instruction to prepare candidates, with a period of catechetical instruction done in relationship to an examination of the faith of children afterwards.. The Lutherans, Reformed, Anglicans, and Roman Catholics (after Trent) all used catechisms, with the English Catechism first appearing in the 1549 Prayer Book.²⁵ However, they each retained the sacramental rite of confirmation separated from baptism.
- *The English Reformation* (1534-1662) left the Church of England with a clear and definite process of Christian initiation. Baptism was a rite of infancy, followed by Catechism and Confirmation, normally at 14-16 years, followed by First Communion. Admission to communion was seen as the response to a communicant making a public profession of faith – not an integral part of sacramental initiation.²⁶ Water baptism was the full initiation while Confirmation was a pastoral rite. Baptismal vows were reaffirmed by those who had been baptized in infancy, with candidates taking on full responsibility of church membership as they received the laying on of hands from the chief pastor, the bishop, with a prayer for strengthening by the Holy Spirit for their new responsibilities.
- *Thomas Cranmer* (1540 Book of Common Prayer) Confirmation a rite reserved exclusively to the bishop; its theological emphasis was on the gift of the Holy Spirit, for strength and constancy;²⁷ the Holy Spirit was given in baptism, confirmation was a catechetical process, signifying the coming of age in the life of faith.²⁸

²³ Thomas Marsh, "Christian Initiation: Practice and Theology" *Confirming the Faith of Adolescents: An Alternative Future for Confirmation* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 13.

²⁴ Paul Turner, *The Meaning and Practice of Confirmation: Perspectives from a Sixteenth-Century Controversy* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1987), 326.

²⁵ Imri M. Blackburn, "The Development of Confirmation Instruction in the Protestant Episcopal Church" *Confirmation: History, Doctrine and Practice*, 55.

²⁶ Reginald H. Fuller, "Confirmation in the Episcopal Church and in the Church of England" *Confirmation Re-Examined*, 11.

²⁷ Charles U. Harris, "The Anglican Understanding of Confirmation" *Confirmation: History, Doctrine and Practice*, 22.

²⁸ Austin, 70.

- In *The Book of Common Prayer 1549*, the anointing with oil is omitted for the first time since apostolic times in the rite of Baptism,²⁹ and the final rubric states, “And there shall none be admitted to the Holy Communion until such time as he be Confirmed.”³⁰ Confirmation was meant to provide children who had come to ‘years of discretion’ (regarded as around 10 to 12 years of age) with a ritual occasion in which they might ratify the promises of Baptism “with their own mouth, and with their own consent, openly before the Church.”³¹ Anointing had been replaced by the laying on of hands – a gesture from the New Testament to mean bonding, blessing, commissioning and healing. This became the outward and visible sign of the bishop’s ministry of Confirmation.
- The *1552 BCP* changes the prayer from “Send down . . .” to “Strengthen . . .” and an additional non-sacramental prayer is said for spiritual growth, “Defend O Lord, this child with thy heavenly grace, that he . . . may . . . daily increase in the Holy Spirit . . .”³² This strengthening appears to assume that the Holy Spirit has been given at baptism, and its presence is called upon for new vitality. A dismissal is pronounced with a prayer that mentions the bishop as successor of the apostles in regard to their ability to communicate the Holy Spirit.³³
- The Reformation continued to add to the meaning of confirmation: increase of grace, power to preach to others, spiritual maturity, and strength for battle in the Christian life. Its delay after baptism saw confirmation as the ratification by an adult to the baptismal promises made on one’s behalf when one was an infant.

The Episcopal Church

- *Samuel Seabury* (1784) – emphasized the importance of Confirmation in his address at the first Connecticut Convention. *Canon 3* adopted in 1789 required regular and frequent Episcopal visitations and administration of Confirmation and *Canon 11* stated that one of the duties of a minister was to “prepare children and others” for Confirmation, and at the Bishop’s visitation the minister was to be ready to present those “previously instructed for the same.”³⁴ The Catechism was adopted as part of the American Book of Common Prayer, following closely to the prayer book of the Church of England. Confirmation was to be administered to baptized persons of competent age when they could say the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Ten Commandments, and repeat answers from the Catechism with some understanding of meaning
- *John Henry Hobart* (1811) – developed the practice of confirming those new to the Episcopal Church and expecting those Episcopalians who had not been confirmed to come for an episcopal blessing.³⁵ Hobart had a high view of the Church and his view of Confirmation was of a rite of apostolic origin, divinely ordained as noted in Acts 8 and the writings of Tertullian, Cyprian, Jerome, Luther and Calvin. He felt it was important for candidates to have a knowledge and meaning of the Catechism and an understanding of the plan of salvation.

²⁹ Harris, 21.

³⁰ Children’s Committee, *Children and the Holy Communion: Guidelines and Resources for Parishes* (The Church in Wales: Council for Mission and Ministry, 2002), 7.

³¹ Stevick, *Baptismal Moments: Baptismal Meanings* 20.

³² Children’s Committee, 7.

³³ Price and Weil, *Liturgy for Living*, revised ed., 82.

³⁴ Blackburn, 60-1.

³⁵ Stevick, *Baptismal Moments: Baptismal Meanings*, 25.

- Confirmation emerged as a sign of membership in the Episcopal Church because the United States had varied Protestant religious values, historically and geographically.³⁶ Finding itself in the midst of an American culture of various denominations that had rejected the practice of confirmation, a biblical foundation was necessary to explain this sacramental sign for the Episcopal Church.
- 1892 through 1928, *BCP* – rite of Confirmation included the lesson from Acts 8:14-17. Many Episcopalians might have thought of this passage as describing their own church – the local priest baptizes and at a later time the bishop, representing the apostolic ministry, confers the Holy Spirit by the laying on of hands.
- *1928 BCP* had lengthy rubrics regarding the responsibility of parents to bring their children to be baptized. Following baptism with water, the minister made the sign of the cross upon the child’s forehead while praying that he shall not be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ crucified and to fight under his banner against sin, the world, and the devil, now being Christ’s faithful soldier.³⁷ Following the Service of Baptism, Offices of Instruction were located in the Prayer Book, which could be used during worship, or as the rubrics admonish, for the clergy to instruct the young in preparation for Confirmation.

Schools of Thought that have implications for today:

- From about 1890 until 1970, a school of thought, popularly known as the “*Mason-Dix*” line, held the view that confirmation was the second and completing half of the full sacrament of initiation. It made a distinction between baptism of water, which provided cleansing from sin, and baptism of the Spirit, bestowed through the imposition of hands. This view insisted that the Spirit was active not in baptism, but in confirmation; the seal of the Spirit that completed Christian initiation.³⁸ Dom Gregory Dix, in 1946 published *The Theology of Confirmation in Relation to Baptism*, in which he maintained that confirmation was a rite taken from the New Testament,³⁹ consisting of a sealing with chrism – the outward sign of the sealing of the Spirit until the day of redemption. He advocated a revision of the doctrine of confirmation, calling for no interval of time between baptism and confirmation.
- In 1951, G. W. Lampe published *The Seal of the Spirit*.⁴⁰ He argued that confirmation was a post-apostolic rite for strengthening those baptized in infancy with the Holy Ghost the Comforter. He insisted that, since membership in Christ is given by faith in the sacrament of baptism, baptism mediates the indwelling presence of the Spirit that also dwelt within Christ. The blessings of initiation are given at baptism, which is unrepeatable and rooted in the New Testament and early church liturgies. Baptism is itself the “seal.” He felt that Confirmation should be administered as close to baptism as possible, with the ratification of baptismal promises of pastoral value. Leonel L. Mitchell agrees one is sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, whether it is the seal of consignation or the inward grace of the washing.⁴¹
- *1979 BCP* – Baptism is regarded as full-initiation into the Church, and all baptized are welcome to receive communion. To make the transition, parishes hold “first communion”

³⁶ Louis Weil, “American Perspectives: (ii) Confirmation” *Children at the Table: The Communion of All the Baptized in Anglicanism Today* (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1995), 71.

³⁷ *The Book of Common Prayer 1928*, 280.

³⁸ Ruth A. Meyers, “By Water and the Holy Spirit: Baptism and Confirmation in Anglicanism” *Anglican Theological Review* Vol. 83, Issue 3, (2001), 417.

³⁹ Fisher, 147.

⁴⁰ G.W.H. Lampe, *The Seal of the Spirit* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1951), 305.

⁴¹ Leonel L. Mitchell, *Praying Shapes Believing: A Theological Commentary on The Book of Common Prayer* (Ridgefield, CT: Morehouse Publishing, 1985), 114-5.

classes for children and parents. Confirmation continues in local congregations when a Bishop makes a visitation; ages continue to be early adolescents, with adults encouraged to reaffirm their Baptismal Vows or be Received into the Episcopal Church.

Concluding comments:

Up until the 1979 BCP, the Episcopal Church followed this model of Christian initiation: baptism in infancy, clergy led education using the Offices of Instruction, followed by the laying on of hands by a bishop, then being welcomed as an adult member to receive Holy Communion for the first time. What was originally one initiation rite in the early Church had become three separate rites of initiation into the faith community. With the advent of the current BCP, programs such as Journey to Adulthood, and deanery-based Confirmation services, there are a variety of understandings of what Confirmation is in the Episcopal Church. Many (mostly parents) continue seeking it as a completion of baptism, adolescents (and parents) regard it as 'graduation' from Church School, and clergy follow a variety of preparation courses (or none at all) in preparing a variety of ages of young people and adults to receive the Laying on of Hands.

Post-script:

In the writing of the 1979 BCP, The Episcopal Church struggled with the development of new rites to reflect this understanding. In the *Introduction to Prayer Book Studies 18* it was explained, "The basic principle of this proposal is the reunion of Baptism, Confirmation, and Communion into a single, continuous services, as it was in the primitive Church."⁴² Urban T. Holmes, a member of the Drafting Committee (1974-1976) argued that the description of Confirmation as an adult affirmation of baptism was not consistent with the typical church practice of confirming young people at ages 9-12, calling the current practice "modern individualism" and "Pelagianism" because grace was being given in relation to merit and free will.⁴³ Controversy continued on sacramental and pastoral grounds.

In 1970, the Liturgical Commission of the Episcopal Church published *Prayer Book Studies 18*, promoting a unified rite of baptism that then appeared in the *Services for Trial Use*.⁴⁴ In this rite, when candidates have been baptized, the bishop or priest, in full sight of the congregation prays, ". . . Sustain them, O Lord, with your Holy Spirit . ." Then he or she lays a hand on each person's head and signs their forehead with the cross, using chrism if desired, and says, "N., you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own for ever." With these words and actions, the sealing of the Spirit and the hand laying are united in baptism. Confirmation was to be eliminated as a separate service, but this proved to be unacceptable because there was no provision for commitment to Christ at the years of discretion. At the 1970 General Convention in Houston, the water baptism part of this rite was adopted as a trial rite, the "sealing" was to be omitted in the case of infants but used for adults, and experiments were encouraged with earlier or later ages for Confirmation.⁴⁵

Two schools of thought emerged from these studies⁴⁶. *Confirmation A* (as named by Charles Price) was the rejoining of Confirmation to baptism. A *Form of Commitment to Christian Service* was developed as an opportunity for those baptized as infants to confess their faith in Christ as they reached an age of maturity and to receive the strengthening of the Spirit. This did not satisfy its detractors, citing a lack of representation of the whole church as represented in

⁴² Ruth Meyers, *The Renewal of Christian Initiation in the Episcopal Church 1928-1979* (University of Notre Dame, 1992), 215.

⁴³ Meyers, *The Renewal*, 262.

⁴⁴ Fisher, 151.

⁴⁵ Fuller, 15.

⁴⁶ Price, *Liturgical Studies 1*, 90-1.

Episcopal polity with the bishop. In 1971 the House of Bishops issued the *Pocono Statement*⁴⁷ that spoke of the pastoral and catechetical side of Confirmation. It stated that in Holy Baptism a person is made fully and completely a Christian and member of the Church. Confirmation was not to be regarded as a procedure of admission to Holy Communion, but a rite of mature affirmation of faith in the presence of the bishop and sealed by the laying on of hands.

A more formal rite of mature commitment was proposed in 1973 that included affirmation of baptismal vows and laying on of hands by the bishop. This was a new service, but titled “Confirmation” despite the possibility of misunderstanding (called *Confirmation B* by Price). Found in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer (within the Rite of Holy Baptism), the entire community is invited to recommit himself or herself to Christ, along with the candidate. A prayer is said for the renewal of what has already happened in baptism: forgiveness of sins, sealing with the Spirit and binding to God’s service. There are two prayer alternatives that can be said as the bishop lays hands upon each candidate. The prayer “Defend, O Lord, . . .” is included, as it has been in every Anglican Prayer Book since 1552, with the exception of the change of “child” to “servant.” The other prayer, speaks of an ongoing sustenance and strengthening by the Spirit:

Strengthen, O Lord, your servant *N.* with your Holy Spirit; empower *him* for your service; and sustain *him* all the days of his life. Amen.

According to Leonel Mitchell, Confirmation is the renewal of the baptismal covenant, not its completion. Confirmands affirm their baptismal commitment while God renews the covenant and empowers them with the Holy Spirit to fulfill their baptismal promises and live the baptismal life to which they are committed.”⁴⁸ The rubrics continue to state that those baptized at an early age are expected, when prepared and ready, to make a mature public affirmation of their faith and receive the laying on of hands by the bishop.

⁴⁷ Louis Weil, “American Perspectives: (ii) Confirmation,” 74-5.

⁴⁸ Mitchell, *Praying Shapes Believing*, 119.