

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Turkish vocables¹ go back to a very early date, and are connected with the old Semitic root, from which we have ventured to suggest the derivation of *Yāhū*. But *unless in this way* we see no reason to connect the Divine Name with that of the Accadian god.

It is remarkable that the word² *Yāhū* as the name of God still exists in Arabic. The creed of the Ansāriyyah² preserves it, though as two separate words, *yā*³ and *hū*, which a false etymology renders, "O He." The word is thus one of the very earliest Divine Names to be found in any language.



Confirmation: A Symposium.

BY THE REV. CANON G. S. STREATFIELD, M.A.,

Rector of Fenny Compton.

I.

WHETHER the subject of Confirmation is debated in town or country its difficulty is freely admitted, and seldom, so far as my experience goes, are any very definite conclusions reached. Since the difficulties that arise are closely connected with the history of the ordinance, it will not be thought out of place if I devote the first part of a discussion of the subject to the diversities of form and custom that meet us as we trace the rite back to its origin in Apostolic days.

It is perhaps strange, considering the important place that Confirmation holds in the discipline and organization of the Church, that we know so little of the ordinance as administered

¹ Turkish in its oldest form presents many points of agreement with Accadian (or Sumerian). Regarding the latter I thoroughly agree with Dr. Hommel's words: "Angesichts solcher Übereinstimmungen wie . . . wo gerade die sumerische Lautlehre das überraschendste Licht auf analoge indogerm. Lautübergänge . . . wirft, dürfte das eingehendste Studium des Sumerischen, dieser ältesten Sprache der Welt, die wir kennen, für Indogermanisten und Altaisten bald zu unabweisbarer Notwendigkeit werden" ("Sum. Lesestücke," p. 55).

² Catafagos's "Arabic Dictionary," p. 463: "Yā hū, yā hū, yā man lā ya'lamu mā hūa il-lā hūa."

in Apostolic and sub-Apostolic times.¹ The only recipients of the rite brought to our notice in the New Testament are recently-baptized adults, in one case in Samaria (Acts viii. 17), in the other at Ephesus (Acts xix. 6). There is no allusion to any such practice in the case of the three thousand persons baptized on the Day of Pentecost. We do not read that Philip insisted upon the Ethiopian eunuch's Confirmation; on the contrary, instead of returning to Jerusalem to be confirmed by an Apostle, the new convert continued his journey to his own land. We have no evidence that St. Paul himself was confirmed, nor are we told that he laid his hands upon the Philippian gaoler and the members of his household after Baptism. The case of Cornelius is obviously exceptional, and it is generally agreed that he and those with him received the gift that usually accompanied the "laying on of hands" before Baptism. Outside the Acts the only distinct reference to the subject to which appeal has been confidently made is in Heb. vi. 2,² where "laying on of hands" appears to be coupled with Baptism; and even here an element of difficulty and doubt is introduced by the use of the word *βαπτισμῶν*, which, according to Trench, cannot be understood of Christian Baptism, for which *βάπτισμα* is the usual term.³ Some writers of authority have found an allusion to Confirmation in the "seal of the Spirit" (2 Cor. i. 22; Eph. i. 13; iv. 30), but the history of the word "seal" in the theology of the

¹ Since this paper was written for the *CHURCHMAN* an important work on Confirmation has been published from the pen of the Bishop of Ely. Reference to this book will be found in the footnotes to the present article. The only general criticism I will venture to make is this: that if the Bishop is right in discovering an allusion to the rite of Confirmation in so many references by St. Paul and others to the gift of the Spirit, the postponement of Baptism to the end of life, and that in an age not long subsequent to that of the Apostles, becomes quite unintelligible. It would practically mean that a large proportion of the Church deliberately cut itself off from the main source of Divine grace.

² Bishop Chase would interpret 2 Tim. i. 6 of Confirmation rather than Ordination.

³ "New Testament Synonyms," p. 347. It is at least possible that the writer, in *βαπτισμοῖ* and *ἐπιθεῖς χερῶν*, was referring exclusively to the Jewish Church. See an article in the *CHURCHMAN* for January, 1909, by A. C. Downer. Bishop Chase, without hesitation, finds Christian Baptism and Confirmation in this passage. He also finds a reference to Confirmation in ii. 3 and x. 29.

Church does not favour this interpretation.¹ Allusions to the gift of the Spirit through "laying on of hands" have also been found in Rom. v. 5, viii. 15; 1 Cor. ii. 12; Gal. iii. 2, *ff.*; Titus iii. 4, *ff.*; Heb. vi. 4; James iv. 5; 1 John iii. 24.² As, however, not one of these passages is explicitly associated with the imposition of hands, or, indeed, with any ecclesiastical rite, no confident appeal can be made to them.

Passing from the writings of the New Testament to those of the early Church, we find little light thrown upon the subject. I believe that nothing is heard of Confirmation until the days of Tertullian—*i.e.*, for something like a century after the close of the Apostolic age. And when we come to Tertullian, and the Fathers who immediately followed him, we are met by four disturbing elements: (1) We have come to a period when, whatever the earlier use, Infant Baptism was the exception, not the rule.³ (2) We find that Baptism and Confirmation, when possible, were administered simultaneously, and this in the case of infants and adults alike. (3) Great stress is laid on unction, a ceremony totally ignored in the Anglican Church, but at that time regarded as an important connecting link between Baptism and "laying on of hands." (4) Mixed with the teaching and

¹ Bishop Chase takes the "seal" as referring, without reasonable doubt, to Confirmation. But what support does this view receive from our commentaries? Westcott, Armitage Robinson, Alford find no such allusion. *Σφραγίς* is used of Baptism by several of the early Fathers—by St. Cyril of the Sign of the Cross in Baptism (see "Dictionary of Antiquities," vol. i., p. 155). Is it ever used by them of Confirmation? St. Paul speaks of the "seal of circumcision" (Rom. iv. 11); and since he, by analogy, connects circumcision with Baptism (Col. ii. 11-13) it is more natural (if the Apostle was referring to any particular rite) to interpret the passages in question of Baptism rather than Confirmation. Further, is not *ἀρραβών*, mentioned in connection with the "seal," more likely to refer to Baptism than to the "laying on of hands"? The initiatory rite, rather than any subsequent one, is God's *pledge* of faithfulness. The first instalment of the Spirit is surely vouchsafed at Baptism. "In one Spirit were we all baptized into one body . . . and were all made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Cor. xii. 13).

² To these Bishop Chase would add Rom. i. 11; 1 Thess. i. 6, iv. 7, *f*; 2 Thess. ii. 13; 2 Cor. xi. 4; Gal. iv. 6, *f*; 1 John ii. 20, *f*, 27. The Bishop depends in his argument much upon the *aorist*; but in the majority of cases the *aorist* can quite as easily be referred to adult Baptism, which the writers had in mind.

³ Tertullian himself raises objections to the practice of Infant Baptism.

ritual of the sacrament of Baptism there is much that savours strongly of superstition.

I have thought it necessary thus briefly to review the history of the ordinance under discussion in the primitive and early Church, because the point I am anxious to press is this, that in the Anglican branch of the Church a view of the subject is taken, which only in a general and indefinite way represents the belief and practice of the earliest age; and, emphasizing the unfixed character of the ordinance, I would urge that its history is such as would justify the introduction of change or modification, both in theory and practice.¹

That the Apostles inaugurated the rite, and that their successors carried it on, is clear. Further, there is no doubt that from the first it was regarded as an important means of grace, conveying a special gift of the Holy Spirit; though, here again, a serious difficulty arises from its connection in the New Testament with miraculous endowments. But now compare our Anglican use with either that of the first or third century. The differences are patent. In particular, a very prominent feature in our Confirmation Service is the ratification on the part of the baptized of promises made by their sponsors. For this aspect of the ordinance we can claim support neither from the New Testament nor from the Fathers. It was, however, inevitable that when Infant Baptism became general, Confirmation should come to be regarded as involving an act of profession and confession on the part of the confirmer. It was an adaptation of the original ordinance which the Church was not only at liberty, but was bound, to make; though, let me urge again, for such adaptation it could appeal neither to the letter of Scripture nor to the practice of antiquity.

Further, when we examine the formularies of the Anglican Church, we find our position somewhat anomalous. The Prayer-Book, as a matter of fact, places us in something like a

¹ "The rite now known by this name (Confirmation) presents a singular instance of the continued use of a symbolic act in the midst of almost every possible diversity of practice, belief, and even terminology."—"Dictionary of Antiquities," vol. i., p. 424.

dilemma. In the Service for the Public Baptism of Infants, parents and god-parents are directed to bring the baptized child to the Bishop for Confirmation *so soon as he can say the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments, and has been further instructed in the Church Catechism set forth for that purpose.* Such words suggest the age of seven or eight rather than that of fourteen or fifteen. The Confirmation Service, on the other hand, could scarcely have been drawn up for little children; from first to last it has in mind, as the rubric indicates, persons who have come to years of discretion. Here, then, is a further difficulty. Not only has the Church of England parted company with antiquity, but hardly seems to know her own mind on the subject.¹

Now, however, coming to the practical and experimental side of the question, is the Anglican position a satisfactory one? Are the candidates, taking them in the mass, the better for their Confirmation? Is their life influenced and solemnized by it? Do we find them, as the result of it, using the special means of grace which it gives them the right to use? If not, there is surely urgent need that the subject should be reconsidered. There are many shades and differences of opinion in regard to the true meaning and Divine intention of the "laying on of hands," but all agree as to the solemnity of the ordinance, and its critical import for life and character. Further, all would agree that Confirmation places the individual in a new stage of his baptismal relation to God, a stage for which due preparation and suitable disposition are indispensable requisites, and the lack of which turns this sacred ordinance into a dead and deadening form.

Since Confirmation involves a personal transaction between God and the individual, it can hardly be disputed that the

¹ We probably may trace the anomaly that I have pointed out to the pre-Reformation Church. In the Roman Church up to the thirteenth century Baptism and Confirmation were theoretically united, as to this day they are in the Eastern Church. In the thirteenth century the Church of Rome made a permanent separation between the two rites, a period of from seven to twelve years being allowed to intervene between Baptism and Confirmation.

spiritual condition and attitude of the confirmer of to-day should correspond to that of a catechumen of the primitive Church. And if, as we learn from St. Paul's writings, Baptism implies death unto sin and new birth unto righteousness, can we suppose that the Apostle would have been satisfied with the spiritual attainments of the average present-day candidate for Confirmation? Confession of Christ in Baptism, in those far-off days, demanded soldier-like qualities which are not required, and assuredly are often not found, in those who, in our day, come forward for Confirmation.

We may thank God the time is past when Confirmation-day was regarded as a day of merry-making, sometimes of roustering and drunkenness, and when it was no uncommon thing for a lad, moving from place to place, to present himself repeatedly for the sake of a "day-off." The clergy of a slumbering Church were more to blame for this state of things than the people they were supposed to shepherd. The perfunctory way in which a very large proportion of the clergy treated the ordinance naturally, inevitably, lowered it in the eyes of their flock and led to a purely conventional view of the matter. The clergy, as a body, are now doing all they can to atone for past neglect; but traditional habits of thought die hard, and the formal, mechanical views inherited from the past have by no means disappeared.

Nor will they disappear until pains are taken to put the matter in a truer light, until indeed the Confirmation Service itself is made the guide of thought and practice. In many parishes (especially in rural districts) whilst Confirmation is regarded very much as a matter of course, there is an almost complete divorce between Confirmation and the Holy Communion. Indeed, considering the character of the average candidate, it is well that it should be so; for it is no breach of charity to say that too often there is little fitness for participation in the holy mystery of the Lord's Supper. In absenting themselves from Holy Communion the instinct of the candidates is a right one; but this only accentuates their mistaken view of Confirmation.

They dare not approach the Holy Table in a thoughtless spirit and with irreverent step; *they have no such scruples about Confirmation.* The boys and girls of a village come forward without urging or persuasion. In some few, very few, exceptional cases, there is seriousness of purpose to start with, and that seriousness is deepened during the time of preparation. In these exceptional cases the candidate presents himself with the avowed purpose of becoming a communicant; and a consistent Christian life is the result. But nothing is further from the intention of an average candidate than to become a regular communicant,¹ or even, I venture to say, to live a definitely Christian life.

There must be something radically wrong in a system of which this is the outcome. Candidates must surely be too easily admitted to the rite of Confirmation to yield such a small proportion of communicants. If you place the true condition of things before a Bishop, he will, as likely as not, tell you (I have myself been so told) that the responsibility rests with the candidate. This is a half-truth; and we know what is said of half-truths. Some of the responsibility, doubtless, rests with the candidate, but very far from the whole. Whatever the sense of responsibility, experience shows that in a very large proportion of cases it brings forth little or no fruit. Year after year we go on presenting candidates; our communicants' roll, meanwhile, remains almost, if not quite, stationary; and we sadly watch the confirmees sink back to the general level of village life, which is too often appallingly far from conforming to the threefold promise of the Christian profession.

I do not hesitate, therefore, to assert that it would be hardly possible to name a more misleading indication of true life and spiritual attainment than the Confirmation statistics which form so prominent a feature in our Diocesan calendars; nor do I ever read them without endorsing Bishop Westcott's words to Archbishop Benson: "Could you say some quiet words about

¹ A large percentage come to Communion the first Sunday after Confirmation. With comparatively few exceptions it is the first and last time.

the perils of statistical religion? It is alarming how the energies of the clergy are taken up in tabulating results. I have boldly cut out all figures from the visitation questions."¹

If, instead of setting so much store by the numerical results of their Confirmation tours, Bishops would institute an inquiry as to the life and conversation of confirmees, and as to the number of them who, to the knowledge of the incumbent, have continued to be communicants for three years from the date of their Confirmation, they would get a far juster view of the real condition of things. It is better to know the truth, however disconcerting, and even humiliating, than to live in a fool's paradise. Indeed, I venture to think that our Bishops may need enlightening on this subject. Not very long ago one of the most experienced, ubiquitous, and efficient of our diocesans publicly deplored the fact that nearly half of those on whom he had laid his hands had not proved regular communicants. Had he said six out of seven in the town, and eleven out of twelve in the country, he would have been very much nearer the mark.² It takes neither persuasion nor conversion to produce a Confirmation candidate, because there is no ordeal of ridicule or opposition to be faced, and public opinion, formed by the traditions of a neglectful past, expects little or nothing from the ordinance. It is very different with the Holy Communion. This, rather than Confirmation, is the real, though very far from conclusive, test of Christian character and Church life.

If the present Confirmation Service is to be retained, excluding, as it emphatically does, the *ex opere operato* view, then

¹ "Life of Bishop Westcott," vol. ii., p. 163.

² I would qualify this statement by adding that the proportion I have given is what I believe to be, approximately, the case in respect of the labouring class. It is higher in the lower and upper middle class. Further, the numbers greatly vary in different dioceses and in different parts of the country. A few months ago *The Guardian* published a table of diocesan percentages of Easter communicants (and for some of our communicants the Easter Communion is the only one) compiled from the *Official Year Book*. From this it appears that the percentage for the aggregate of dioceses in 1906 was 6·28 of the population. The percentage of the several dioceses varied from 13·35 in Hereford to 3·61 in Durham. This indirectly demonstrates the lamentable disproportion of communicants to confirmees. It is much to be wished that our Bishops would boldly face this disproportion.

vastly more care is demanded than is often exercised before presenting candidates to the Bishop. If the Prayer-Book means what it says, those who are ready for Confirmation are ready for Communion. Experience proves that only a very small proportion are ready for the latter. Here, if anywhere, then 's a case where results should be weighed, not counted; and I honestly believe that if the Confirmation returns were one-fifth of what they are at present, our Church would be strengthened, not weakened, provided always that the diminution resulted from stricter discrimination on the part of the clergy. It is never easy to change and re-form public opinion, but until opinion and method in regard to Confirmation are changed, an ordinance full of significance, full of blessing to the worthy recipient, is being brought into contempt by a vast majority of those who conform to it.

The Church, as I have tried to show in the opening part of this paper, has always felt herself justified in adapting this means of grace to present need, as that need has varied from age to age; further, I have pointed out that our own formularies contain important elements which can claim no authority from Scripture or primitive antiquity. We should therefore be acting on precedent as well as principle, if, to-day, some modification of the present far too promiscuous practice were introduced, and the ordinance lifted to a higher level of spirituality. We have made Confirmation far too cheap. What chiefly needs to be done is to bring the practice of the Church up to the level of its formulary. Bearing in mind the whole character and intention of the Confirmation Service, the clergy should use every effort to prevent the most solemn of promises being made by careless lips, and to preclude the imposition of hands on those who, not only have no real intention of becoming communicants, but have few, if any, serious thoughts of life and responsibility.

