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Confirmation :

The Teaching of the Anglican Divines¹

BY JAMES ATKINSON

THERE are moments in history when it seems that the whole significance of the past is concentrated into one person or incident or discovery, and when the truth disclosed by that person or occasion gives both the past its meaning, the present its significance, and the future its direction. This would appear true in all aspects of human development—for example, an Archimedes, a Copernicus or a Newton, a Mendel or a Darwin, a Marx, a Freud, a Lister. The list could be developed. In each province of each man's work all past knowledge and experience crystallize into a universal law or principle, which both explains the past and gives direction and purpose to future development.

The supreme example of this is the work of Christ, when He showed the whole meaning of God's historic work in the handling of His people under the Law and changed and fulfilled this dispensation into God's handling of man in His Gospel. Man then saw the meaning of the past, the significance of the present, and the direction of the future.

On a different level, Paul could be instanced similarly. Paul was given the mystery which, from the beginning of the world, had been hid in God that the heathen should be fellow-heirs of the promise of the Gospel (Eph. 3). When Paul turned to the Gentiles, the world then knew and saw of itself that the tender plant so long nurtured in Israel, had been intended for transplantation to every part of the world. Men saw the meaning of the past, the significance of the present, and the direction of the future. Nothing could ever be the same again.

Similarly, and on the theme of my lecture, when in October 1520 Luther wrote his book on *The Babylonish Captivity of the Church*, the sacramental theology of the Church suffered a shock which fragmented her whole sacramental system. Luther's theology was a total re-orientation of Christian theology, it was the transmutation of an egocentric theology into a Christocentric one, the conversion of a religion of works and merit into one of forgiveness and faith, of a *theologia gloriae* into a *theologia crucis*; he gave the authority of a scholarly study of the Bible for that of canon law, of a Word from God rather than a word from the pope. He set the Church spinning on her true axis of Christ and the Gospel instead of the pope and canon law. However, it is on this occasion only in relation to sacramental theology we can develop this evangelical approach, but it always needs emphasizing that all sacramental theology must be kept within the framework of the Gospel. To Luther a sacrament is essentially a word, a Word from God, as it was to the writers of our Prayer Book who both interpreted the sacrament as Word and also prescribed preaching within the Holy Communion. Luther was always uneasy about the distinction between Word *and* sacrament. He saw the Word

in the sacrament, the sacrament as Word, and therefore the Word as sacrament.¹ It was the *verbum visibile*, a phrase Cranmer used : God's normal channel for speaking to His folk. This distinction Tyndale very carefully preserved—for example : “ The sacraments which Christ ordained preach God's Word unto us, and therefore justify, and minister the Spirit to them that believe ”.² The idea of the Church of God having developed through the centuries a powerful sacramental system as a means of authority and discipline, a means of granting almost unlimited powers to the priesthood, for all practical purposes a money making rather than a soul saving system, was, to Luther, inconceivable, as well as unwarrantable and unjustifiable. He saw sacraments as any evangelical saw and sees them : expressions of a merciful God seeking to save, nurture, and speak to souls. He permitted only baptism and communion as true dominical sacraments (although he was prepared to grant penance a sacramental dignity at the beginning of the debate, though not at the end). Confirmation he reckoned a rite or ceremony of the Church, whilst the others—matrimony, orders, and unction—were removed from the list on the grounds that only the first two had the dominical authority and the divine promise. This cool analysis the Papists never faced up to and never adequately answered, although the whole book is argued on a reasonable interpretation both of Scripture and tradition. It was this book that drew out Henry VIII's attack on Luther, for which he earned his solicited distinction of *fidei defensor* at the hands of the pope. What Rome found in this theology was a threat to her power, for by her sacramental system she controlled a Christian from the cradle to the grave. Any acceptance of Luther's evangelical position, unanswerable in itself, would have meant a surrender of papist catholicism in the interests of a true evangelical catholicism.

This theology had a marked and abiding influence on the Anglican position worked out in our Prayer Book and formularies, and given expression, for example, forcefully by Tyndale,⁴ and somewhat more gently by Cranmer,⁵ as well as by many others of our reforming fathers, Henry VIII's book notwithstanding. It is generally thought that it was the Calvinist theology sponsored by the foreign exiles and our returned Marian exiles, and later represented by the Puritans down to the Restoration, that influenced Anglicanism in general and our Prayer Book in particular, but it seems to me that it is the more conservative, pastoral, personal, evangelical soul-winning theology of Luther of a generation earlier that is more determinative. Luther created the possibility of Anglicanism, even if the later creators of Anglicanism sought a more moderate position on the lines of Melancthon or even Erasmus, and even though the God-gripped mind of Calvin won the allegiance of their successors.

This leads me to the other strong reforming influence in England and Scotland of Calvin, with whom we may group for the purposes of this inquiry, the Calvinist exiles and the Puritans. Calvin saw confirmation as the ancient custom of the Church (instanced by Leo and Jerome) whereby young people at adolescence make a confession of faith on the basis of an instruction of a catechism, a confession they could not make

at baptism. This custom was enhanced by the ancient solemn custom of the laying on of hands. He saw this as having degenerated into a fictitious sacrament whereby it was claimed that the sacrament of confirmation conferred the Holy Spirit by solemn unction. But Calvin raised the question : Where was the authority for this, and on what basis were we to be assured that oil purveys the Holy Spirit ? To claim the authority of Acts 8 : 15-17, when Peter and John laid hands on the Samaritans is unwarranted, for these dispensations ceased at the death of the apostles. We as a Church already possess the Holy Spirit, confirmation does not purvey it. The sacrament lacks the promise of God and the Word of God which would give it reality. To make of confirmation a completion of baptism is to lead us away from the evangelical and theological reality of baptism. This is virtually claimed when it is taught that a man cannot be a complete Christian until he be chrismed by episcopal confirmation. Calvin was pleading for a return to primitive practice, whereby an adolescent could render a competent confession of faith, a complete but simple catechism before the congregation of faithful men, a catechism in which all could concur without controversy.

* * * *

Though there is some evidence* of indifference to confirmation in England during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, indeed ever since the days of Wycliffe, yet when the views, first of Luther and then later of Calvin began to be made known, nobody seemed to doubt but that the gift of the Holy Spirit was given by the laying on of a bishop's hands. After Luther men questioned this. Luther caught up the whole long story of Christendom, gave it its present significance, and set it on its course with fresh bearings. In 1536 and 1537 we find both bishops and convocation discussing the meaning of confirmation. In April 1536 the Sixteen Articles of Wittenberg were sent to England (partly for political rapprochement) and out of this deliberation our Ten Articles were issued, which discussed the three sacraments of baptism, penance, and the eucharist. In the following year Convocation met to discuss a new formulary under a very powerful committee consisting of both archbishops, seven diocesans, and thirteen theologians. The clearest views were Cranmer's, who took the view that there is no scriptural authority for considering confirmation a sacrament; the evidences usually quoted were apostolic deeds specially blessed by God to further His Word, a dispensation which ceased with the apostles and did not remain with their successors.⁷ Other views were expressed in the discussion, and the debate issued in the Bishops' Book of 1537* (licensed for three years), where the institution of confirmation is ascribed not to our Lord but to the apostles, and its present form to the fathers of the primitive Church. The outward sign was prayer with the laying on of hands and consignation with chrism. The discussion continued and modified this position to reach the King's Book of 1543. Here confirmation is considered one of the seven sacraments. The apostles had laid their hands on the baptized with prayer by which act the Holy Ghost was given. The laying on of hands was considered the matter of the sacrament ; the

consignation of the chrism whereby the baptized were confirmed and strengthened was the preservation of the primitive practice of the Church. The sacrament should not be condemned (proof that it was being opposed), though it was not necessary for salvation. What all this means is that at the death of Henry VIII (1547) the doctrine of confirmation had moved from its Lutheran-Calvinist position to a more "catholic" position.

There is interesting evidence in the records of contemporary practice. We find Wolsey confirming large numbers in 1529, and this would indicate, as we would expect, a popular lay belief in confirmation. But very significant is the ribald abuse of the Reformers of the contemporary practice of confirmation. Tyndale is merciless with his sarcasm about the clout, etc.,⁹ wherever he discusses contemporary practice. Becon (Cranmer's chaplain) speaks trenchantly of the same things, the linen clout, the papist oil, the mumbling of a few Latin words over a child. He asks what confirmation it is that makes no mention of faith and uses no catechism. He dismisses it as sorcery.¹⁰ These and other examples serve to show the deep contradiction between Reformed practice and contemporary "catholic" practice.

The publication of the Prayer Book marks a decisive change in contemporary practice in favour of the Reformed position. The service was in English, chrism was omitted, and the laying on of hands retained, and the whole prefaced with a catechism, a pure Lutheran practice. None was to be confirmed unless he could say the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments, and answer catechetical questions set by the bishop. The rubrics laid down a regular system of preparation, as well as the necessity of confirmation before any admission to the holy communion.

This was criticized by Bucer, as indeed the entire Prayer Book was. Bucer sought "proof" of a candidate's worthiness, and the pastoral necessity of more frequent confirmations even if it meant delegation by the bishops. The Second Prayer Book of 1552 made little change in the 1549 order. Edward died in 1553, and Mary's Act of Repeal would mean that the Order of Confirmation would revert to that of Henry VIII's day, which would mean the restoration of the chrism, the signing with the cross, the service in Latin, and no laying on of hands.

* * * *

In 1559 Elizabeth restored the 1552 position, but the Marian exiles who were returning were of a more markedly Calvinistic view—for example, Becon (1563)¹¹ and Calhill (1565).¹² John Jewel (1522-71) took a more comprehensive view.¹³ Confirmation is no sacrament, he maintained, but he also said that the differences lie in the terms rather than the matter. Still, he takes up a clear Reformed position, that confirmation was a ratifying of the baptismal profession in prayer followed by the laying on of the bishop's hands. This is the exact position of Cranmer.¹⁴ These would not allow (as Luther and Calvin did not allow) the citing of Acts 8 and 19 to support confirmation as scriptural or that it objectively brought in the Holy Spirit.

Alexander Nowell (1507-1602) published his famous Catechism in 1563. He takes up the position of Cranmer that confirmation was of

ancient practice, and that when children were sufficiently instructed and approved by the bishop they were to be confirmed by him. He criticizes "catholic" practice on the grounds that it was recent and was theologically unsound. In 1571 the Articles were finally revised and the Anglican position clarified in Article XXV.

Still the Puritans pressed home their theology. Cartwright took the view that the whole procedure was papist and non-scriptural, but Whitgift handled him very firmly with his more moderate Calvinism, arguing that Calvin was disapproving of "popish" confirmation not Anglican confirmation. There is evidence (Robert Cawdrey, 1587, and Hooker, 1597) that Puritanism was sufficiently strong to cause widespread neglect of confirmation, and that many were admitted to communion unconfirmed.

But the answer Hooker gave to Cartwright,¹⁵ with his appeal to Scripture, tradition, and reason proved more comprehensive than the answer Whitgift gave. Hooker does not discuss the examination of candidates, the ratification of vows, or the release of godparents from their obligations. He does not take up Calvin's view of the primitive catechumenate confirmation, and see Anglican confirmation as a type of this, but bases confirmation on both scriptural and historical grounds quite objectively as the laying on of the bishop's hands with the gift of the Spirit. Hooker gave the power of confirmation to bishops normally, though not necessarily invariably. After Hooker the neglect of confirmation ceased, though Puritanism was still strong. Prayer Books of 1578 and 1589 have no confirmation service at all! Further, the Millenary Petition and the Hampton Court Conference (1604) both request that confirmation be abolished. With Hooker there is certainly a move from the old evangelical position in the interests of a more comprehensive and "catholic" system. This was expressed in the Canons of 1603 which support confirmation as an ancient custom and charge bishops with the responsibility of performing it at least once in three years and clergy with the responsibility of preparation. Hooker's views prevailed too at the Hampton Court Conference. Confirmation was related closely to the profession of faith, the knowledge of the catechism, and an explanation of the sacraments added. But nevertheless, Puritanism still had a firm hold, witness the powerful treatise of Rogers on the Articles (1579-85) with its invective against popish confirmation.

In his *Χειροθεσις* (published 1649), Joseph Hall holds that there is a gift of the Holy Spirit given in confirmation and that it is given in response to the prayers of the bishop and congregation. He grounds the practice on Scripture (Acts 8, 19, and Heb. 6) as well as on the fathers, and asserts that the apostles conveyed the Holy Spirit and their successors may justly claim the same privilege. He thinks Rome over-values confirmation, the Reformed churches under-value it, whilst Anglicanism has found the true balance. But when Laud was committed to the Tower in 1640, the Prayer Book remained illegal until the Restoration of 1660.

From the high Anglican side works on confirmation continued to be produced—for example, the Royalist, William Brough, Dean of Gloucester, produced a very learned Latin treatise, and Henry Ham-

mond, the Royalist Canon of Christ Church, took the same line in his *On Fundamentals* (1653/54). From the Puritan side, Jonathan Hammer published his *Τελείωσις* (1657), and Richard Baxter, in his *Confirmation and Restauration* (1658), gives a kindly, pastoral, evangelical, and scholarly account, but concludes that "confirmation is not a matter of flat necessity".¹⁶ He took a clear line of admitting to Holy Communion the unconfirmed as a means of reconciliation between separated bodies of Christians, and argued that confirmation is not the exclusive prerogative of bishops. Baxter's whole case is argued in defence of the Prayer Book in the light of theological, historical, and practical considerations. He differs from the Prayer Book only in one point, that is, episcopal confirmation, but the explanation of this lies in that he saw Anglican bishops and presbyters both as legitimate descendants of the same New Testament prototype.

With the Restoration the Puritans at the Savoy Conference of 1661 made representations of their views on the lines of Cartwright and the Calvinists a century earlier. The bishops remained firm to the views expressed by Hooker, but certain objections were met: it was insisted that candidates had to reach years of discretion and give some account of their faith as well as a public profession of it, and the rigid rubric requiring confirmation as a prerequisite of communion was changed into being "ready or desirous to be confirmed". Men like Cosin and Thorndike developed the position established by Hooker, and Thorndike in particular sought a unity based on the apostolate of which the bishops were the successors. By episcopal confirmation the faithful were integrated with the bishop and therefore with the whole church, of whose faith and unity the bishop is the guardian and symbol. To Thorndike the bishop was the key to unity. Thorndike seems alone in handling confirmation from the point of view of reunion.

Greatest of all Anglican works on confirmation is Jeremy Taylor's *Χρῆσις Τελειωτικῆ* (published 1663). Taylor has sympathy with neither Papist nor Puritan, and tackles the subject from its doctrinal, historical, and practical sides. He defends it as a sacrament in the larger sense in which that term has been used in Christendom, and in the sense which Cranmer allowed in the use of the word. He finds it scriptural (Mk. 1: 10, Jn. 3: 5, Acts 8: 14-17, 19: 1-6, Heb. 6: 1f.), and concludes that it is apostolic and divine.¹⁷ He defends it as a perpetual ministry in the Church, and shows it has been such through the ages, marshalling a good deal of patristic and conciliar evidence. Bishops are the only means of confirming, normally performed by laying on of hands, but he raises no objection to chrism where that has been observed. He takes the uncompromising view that it is the Holy Spirit that is purveyed. He inclined to the Anglican position of confirming not infants but children at an age, as he charmingly described it, when they were old enough to understand the fundamentals of religion but not old enough to have been stained with sin. Taylor's must be our finest and most learned treatment of confirmation.

With Jeremy Taylor our historical sketch must end, though others, as, for example, Canfield, the parish parson of Leicester, in his sermons

(1682), William Falkner (1674) in his *Libertas Ecclesiastica*, Robert South, Canon of Christ Church (1685), and George Hickee, a London vicar (1680-6), show the concern for confirmation, a concern supported by the visitation inquiries of the period. Their theology is essentially that of Hooker and Jeremy Taylor. Strangely enough, all this thinking seemed to count for very little, for by the time of the early nineteenth century confirmations were both scandalous and rare, a situation remedied only by the evangelical bishops Ryder of Gloucester, Sumner of Winchester, and Wilberforce, that "remodeller of the episcopate", whose practice set the whole tone of Anglican confirmation down to the present day.

* * * *

With this inadequate sketch of our Anglican divines I must close, but take leave to suggest one or two points which emerge from the study :

(a) *Confirmation itself*

1. Although we would always want to pay respect to the theology of our Anglican divines, Hooker, Taylor, Thorndike, to name the chief, it would appear that with the exception of the Puritan divines, Anglican theologians have tended (are tending?) to move away from the Reformed position. But that which is binding on us, and that by which we stand and fall, is that expressed in our Prayer Book and Articles, which are unequivocally evangelical and Reformed. Confirmation is no completion or fulfilment of the sacrament of baptism. In baptism a Christian man has the whole Gospel: more he does not need, more he cannot find. Confirmation is a ratification before the Church which a young person must make on the threshold of maturity. He must have learnt the essentials of the faith, profess them, and, in prayer with the people of God, the bishop blesses this profession. It cannot be some objective purveying of the Holy Spirit, since the child already has his life experience of the Spirit. It is an ancient and laudable custom, to which we remain loyal. It was the clearest intention of the Reformers to combine instruction with confirmation, a practice they believed of catholic and traditional authority. In this connection I regret the powerful evangelical appeal of the Catechism is not more effectively and powerfully taught. A remarkable characteristic of Luther was his concern for teen-agers and young people that they be properly educated and made into young Christian men and women for life. We could well emulate this concern today. The Reformers were all teachers and preachers consumingly concerned to communicate to dying men the life-giving Word of God. Evangelicals need ever to remind themselves of this, for they tend to be too narrow and too negative. The evangelical cause stands or falls, like Christianity, by what it says.

2. It seems to me an unwarrantable intrusion of a questionable theology to make confirmation as of apostolic authority and to claim for it an objective transmission of the Holy Spirit, hitherto lacking. This is neither the theology of the New Testament, nor that of the Reformers, nor that of our Prayer Book and Articles. God grants His Spirit when the Word of His Gospel has been heard and heeded,

and the only safeguard to this evangelical truth is to insist that the young adult sees and knows this of himself, a truth declared in baptism and ratified of his own volition in confirmation.

(b) *Intercommunion*

It is not Prayer Book Anglicanism, nor even historic Anglicanism, which would insist on confirmation as a prior necessity to communion. The Confirmation Rubric is intended for domestic guidance as a norm of practice. Anglicanism never even doubted the validity of non-episcopal *ordination* in the sixteenth century and later, and even offered non-episcopally ordained men high posts in the Anglican Church and in our universities. This was in effect, intercommunion. As one of the "thirty-two theologians", I can only repeat what I have said and written elsewhere, advocating an immediate and more comprehensive intercommunion not based on episcopal confirmation. This would be no advance as such. It would be reclamation of land now lost but which was once ours four hundred years ago.

(c) *Ecumenical Relations*

In the larger field of ecumenical relations, in particular with Rome and with the Eastern churches, may I revive what is, as far as I know, the first suggestion towards ecumenical unity. I refer to Luther's suggestion when, in 1520, before the final break with Rome, he turned as a last resort to the lay mind, appealing for what Rome steadily refused to grant, an international council of clergy and scholars held not on Italian soil, and not dominated by the papal Curia, but free to express and discuss under the Emperor's secular guarantee of freedom and justice all the theological problems that beset a divided Christendom. If this could be realized now, God would not let us down. This move will perhaps never be made by Catholics, Anglican or Roman. It could be made by Evangelicals. Πιστὸς ὁ καλῶν ὑμᾶς, ὅς καὶ ποιήσει (I Thess. 5: 24). Καλῶν is a present participle.

¹ The writer would like to acknowledge his indebtedness to the two volumes published by the S.P.C.K. in 1926 on Confirmation, particularly the essay by Ollard. Vol. I, pp. 60ff.

² See Roth : *Sakrament nach Luther* (1952), pp. 25f.

³ Tyndale : *The Obedience of a Christian Man*, in *Works*, Vol. I, p. 283.

⁴ Tyndale : *Works*, Vol. I, pp. 273ff.

⁵ Cranmer : *Questions and Answers*, in *Works*, Vol. II, p. 115ff.

⁶ Manning : *The People's Faith in the Time of Wycliffe* (1919), pp. 59f.

⁷ Capes : *The English Church in the 14th and 15th Centuries*, p. 229.

⁸ Cranmer : *Works*, Vol. II, p. 80.

⁹ *Formularies of Faith*, Henry VIII (1825), pp. 94ff.

¹⁰ Tyndale : *Works*, Vol. I, p. 225.

¹¹ Becon : *Works*, Vol. III, p. 234.

¹² Becon : *Works*, Vol. III, pp. 596ff.

¹³ Calfhill : *Answer to Martiall*, p. 215.

¹⁴ Jewel : *Works*, Vol. II.

¹⁵ Cranmer : *Works*, Vol. II, p. 419.

¹⁶ Hooker : *Eccles. Polity*, V, lxi.

¹⁷ Baxter : *Practical Works*, Vol. XIV, pp. 466ff.

¹⁸ *Works*, Vol. XI, p. 249.