

The Confirmation of Children as Communicant Members

From John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, Book IV, 19.4-5, 9, 12-13, English updated and emphasis added.

OF CONFIRMATION

A Biblical confirmation

4. It was anciently customary for the children of Christians, after they had grown up, to appear before the bishop to fulfill that duty which was required of such adults as presented themselves for baptism. These sat among the catechumens until they were properly instructed in the mysteries of the faith, and could make a confession of it before bishop and people. The infants, therefore, who had been initiated by baptism, not having then given a confession of faith to the Church, were again, toward the end of their boyhood, or on adolescence, brought forward by their parents, and were examined by the bishop in terms of the Catechism which was then in common use.

In order that this act, which otherwise justly required to be grave and holy, might have more reverence and dignity, the ceremony of laying on of hands was also used. Thus the boy, on his faith being approved, was dismissed with a solemn blessing.

Ancient writers often make mention of this custom. Pope Leo says (*Epist.* 39), "If anyone returns from heretics, let him not be baptized again, but let that which was there lacking to him — namely, the virtue of the Spirit, be conferred by the laying on of the hands of the bishop."

Our opponents will here exclaim, that the name of sacrament is justly given to that by which the Holy Spirit is conferred. But Leo elsewhere explains what he means by these words (*Epist.* 77); "Let not him who was baptized by heretics be rebaptized, but be confirmed by the laying on of hands with the invocation of the Holy Spirit, because he received only the form of baptism without sanctification."

Jerome also mentions it (Jerome, *Altercatio Luciferiani et orthodoxiseu dialogus contra Luciferianos*). Now though I deny not that Jerome is somewhat under delusion when he says that the observance is apostolical, he is, however, very far from the follies of these men. And he softens the expression when he adds, that this benediction is given to bishops only, more in honor of the priesthood than from any necessity of law. **This laying on of hands, which is done simply by way of benediction, I commend, and would like to see restored to its pure use in the present day.**

A false, corrupt confirmation

5. A later age having almost obliterated the reality, introduced a kind of fictitious confirmation as a divine sacrament. They feigned that the virtue of confirmation consisted in conferring the Holy Spirit, for increase of grace, on him who had been prepared in baptism for righteousness, and in confirming for contest those who in baptism were regenerated to life. This confirmation is performed by unction, and the following form of words: "I sign thee with the sign of the holy cross, and confirm thee with the chrism of salvation, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." All fair and venerable. But where is the word of God which promises the presence of the Holy Spirit here? Not one iota can they allege. How will they assure us that their chrism is a vehicle of the Holy Spirit? We see oil, that is, a thick and greasy liquid, but

nothing more. "Let the word be added to the element," says Augustine, "and it will become a sacrament." Let them, I say, produce this word if they would have us to see anything more in the oil than oil. But if they would show themselves to be ministers of the sacraments as they ought, there would be no room for further dispute.

The first duty of a minister is not to do anything without a command [from God in His word]. Come, then, and let them produce some command for this ministry, and I will not add a word. If they have no command, they cannot excuse their sacrilegious audacity. For this reason our Savior interrogated the Pharisees as to the baptism of John, "Was it from heaven, or of men?" (Matthew 21:25). If they had answered, Of men, he held them confessed that it was frivolous and vain; if of heaven, they were forced to acknowledge the doctrine of John. Accordingly, not to be too contumelious to John, they did not venture to say that it was of men. Therefore, if confirmation is of men, it is proved to be frivolous and vain; if they would persuade us that it is of heaven, let them prove it

9. They add, moreover, that all believers ought, after baptism, to receive the Holy Spirit by the laying on of hands, that they may become complete Christians, inasmuch as there never can be a Christian who has not been chrismed by Episcopal confirmation. These are their exact words. **I thought that everything pertaining to Christianity was prescribed and contained in Scripture.** [Calvin now adds sarcastically:] Now I see that the true form of religion must be sought and learned elsewhere than in Scripture. Divine wisdom, heavenly truth, the whole doctrine of Christ, only begins the Christian; it is the oil that perfects him. **By this sentence are condemned all the apostles and the many martyrs who, it is absolutely certain, were never chrismed ["christened"],** the oil not yet being made, besmeared with which, they might fulfill all the parts of Christianity, or rather become Christians, which, as yet, they were not. Though I were silent, they abundantly refute themselves. How small the proportion of the people whom they anoint after baptism! Why, then, do they allow among their flock so many half Christians, whose imperfection they might easily remedy? Why, with such supine negligence, do they allow them to omit what cannot be omitted without grave offense? Why do they not more rigidly insist on a matter so necessary, that, without it, salvation cannot be obtained unless, perhaps, when the act has been anticipated by sudden death? When they allow it to be thus licentiously despised, they tacitly confess that it is not of the importance which they pretend. . . .

12. When they see that the word of God, and everything like plausible argument, fail them, they pretend, as usual, that the observance is of the highest antiquity, and is confirmed by the consent of many ages. Even were this true, they gain nothing by it. **A sacrament is not of earth, but of heaven; not of men, but of God only. They must prove God to be the author of their confirmation, if they would have it to be regarded as a sacrament.**

But why obtrude antiquity, seeing that **ancient writers**, whenever they would speak precisely, **nowhere mention more than two sacraments**? Were the bulwark of our faith to be sought from men, we have an impregnable citadel in this, that the fictitious sacraments of these men were never recognized as sacraments by ancient writers.

They [ancient writers] speak of the laying on of hands, but do they call it a sacrament? Augustine distinctly affirms that it is nothing but prayer (*De baptismo contra Donatistas* lib. 3 c. 16). Let them not here yelp out one of their vile distinctions, that the laying on of hands to which Augustine referred was not the confirmatory, but the curative or reconciliatory. His book is extant and in men's hands, if I wrest it to any meaning

different from that which Augustine himself wrote it, they are welcome not only to load me with reproaches after their accustomed manner, but to spit upon me. He is speaking of those who returned from schism to the unity of the Church. He says that they have no need of a repetition of baptism, for the laying on of hands is sufficient, that the Lord may bestow the Holy Spirit upon them by the bond of peace. But as it might seem absurd to repeat laying on of hands more than baptism, he shows the difference: "What," he asks, "is the laying on of hands but prayer over the man?" That this is his meaning is apparent from another passage, where he says, "Because of the bond of charity, which is the greatest gift of the Holy Spirit, without which all the other holy qualities which a man may possess are ineffectual for salvation, the hand is laid on reformed heretics" (Augustine, *De baptismo contra Donatistas* lib. 5 c. 23).

Biblical confirmation revisited

13. I wish we could retain the custom, which, as I have observed, existed in the early Church, before this abortive mask of a sacrament appeared. It would not be such a confirmation as they pretend, one which cannot even be named without injury to baptism, but **catechizing by which those in boyhood, or immediately beyond it, would give an account of their faith in the face of the Church.** And the best method of catechizing would be, if a form were drawn up for this purpose, containing, and briefly explaining, the substance of almost all the heads of our religion, in which the whole body of the faithful ought to concur without controversy.

A boy of ten years of age would present himself to the Church, to make a profession of faith, would be questioned on each heading, and give answers to each. If he was ignorant of any point, or did not well understand it, he would be taught. Thus, **while the whole Church looked on and witnessed he would profess the one true sincere faith with which the body of the faithful, with one accord, worship one God.**

Were this discipline in force in the present day, it would undoubtedly whet the sluggishness of certain parents, who carelessly neglect the instruction of their children, as if it did not at all belong to them, but who could not then omit it without public disgrace, there would be greater agreement in faith among the Christian people, and not so much ignorance and rudeness; some persons would not be so readily carried away by new and strange dogmas; in short, it would furnish all with a methodical arrangement of Christian doctrine.