

Confirmation.

- 'Confirmation, or the Laying on of Hands.' Two vols., by various writers (of the Anglican Communion). S.P.C.K. 1926.
- 'Religious Values in the Sacraments.' H. J. Wotherspoon, D.D. T. & T. Clark. 1928.
- 'Confirmation and Restauration: the Necessary Means of Reformation and Reconciliation.' Richard Baxter. 1648. (Folio Edition. London. 1707.)
- 'Euchologion: A Book of Common Order.' Issued by the Church Service Society. 2nd Edition. 1869.
- 'Prayers for Divine Service.' Issued by authority of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. Blackwood. 1923.
- 'Liturgie à l'usage des Eglises Réformées.' Publiée par Eug. Bersier, Pasteur à Paris. Nouvelle Edition. Fischbacher. 1881.

It is now of general custom, if not of law, in the Church of Scotland to admit young people and others to the participation of the Lord's Supper for the first time with some sort of solemn ceremony at Divine Service. It is only, however, since the appearance of "Prayers for Divine Service" in 1923 that this custom has received the authority of the General Assembly. The only direct pronouncement of the Assembly upon the Admission of young persons to their first Communion is an Act of 1706, recommending it "to the several ministers within this National Church to take as strict a trial as can be of such as they admit to the Lord's Supper, especially before their first admission thereto, and that they diligently instruct them particularly as to the Covenant of Grace, and the nature and end of that ordinance, as a seal thereof and charge upon their consciences, the obligations they lie under from their Baptismal covenant, and seriously exhort them to renew the same." This Act no more than deals with the instruction, examination, and exhortation of Catechumens, along with all other intending communicants, and does not so much as suggest any ceremony of admission. The General Assembly has therefore entered upon new ground in authorising a *Form and Order for the Confirmation of Baptismal Vows and Admission to the Lord's Supper*, to be used after the Sermon at a Service of preparation for Holy Communion.

I.

In the second edition of 'Euchologion,' published by the Church Service Society in 1869, there is given a *Form and Order for the Admission of Catechumens*. This is preceded by a short account "of the way in which this Service is conducted in Protestant Churches," including a historical résumé regarding Scotland. It will be of interest to reproduce that résumé, which was printed and circulated as a separate paper by the Society. There is no signature, but it is not difficult to assign it to Dr Sprott:—

The First Book of Discipline says, that "none are to be admitted to the mystery (the Lord's Supper) who cannot formally say the Lord's Prayer, the Articles of Belief, nor declare the sum of the law;" also that, "every year at the least, public examination be had by the ministers and elders of the knowledge of every person in the Kirk."

There was at this period no regulation as to the manner of admitting young people to the Communion. The idea seems to have prevailed that they should communicate very early. James Melville did so, he tells us, at the age of thirteen. The annual examination obviously took the place of the annual private confession before the Reformation.

In 1618 prelatial confirmation was enjoined by the Articles of Perth, but was seldom or ever practised. In 1641 Henderson says, in his 'Government and Order of the Church of Scotland,' that "none are admitted to the Lord's Supper but such as, upon examination, are found to have a competent measure of knowledge in the grounds of the Christian religion, and the doctrine of the Sacraments, and are able, according to the Apostle's commandment, and profess themselves willing to examine themselves, and to renew their covenant made with God in baptism, promising to walk as beseemeth Christians, and to submit themselves to all the ordinances of Christ."

At Westminster the subject was passed over in very general terms, partly on account of the discord between the Independents and Presbyterians as to the qualifications for Church Membership. The defect has been felt wherever the Westminster Standards have been received.

At the Restoration, a few years after the Assembly, the English Presbyterian divines, in their negotiations as to the Church, required "that none should be admitted to the . . . Lord's Supper, till they have . . . understood the meaning of their baptismal covenant, and with their own mouths, and their own consent, openly before the Church, ratified and confirmed, and also promised that, by the grace of God, they will evermore endeavour themselves faithfully to observe and keep such things as . . . they have assented to." . . .

“ Unless it be in case of some extraordinary natural imperfection and inability of utterance, let him (they say) at least openly recite the Creed, and profess his consent to the covenant with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.”

In the Form of Process, or Book of Discipline, which, after the Revolution, occupied the attention of several General Assemblies, and which was printed for transmission to Presbyteries in 1704, there is the following regulation : “ At the first admission of any to the Lord’s Supper, ministers should put the persons to be admitted in mind of their parents’ engagements for them in baptism, and put them, explicitly and personally, to renew their baptismal covenant to be the Lord’s, and to live unto Him, and serve Him all the days of their lives.” In 1706 the Assembly passed an Act to this effect.

The want of something more definite has, however, given rise to a great variety of practice, and the intention of the Church is not always carried out. Cases of failure are to be expected under all “ systems which rest upon the heroic virtues.”

In the American Presbyterian Church an addition is made to the Directory, with the view of supplying the defect in the Westminster Standards ; and in some of the colonial offshoots from Scottish Presbyterianism questions are prescribed to be put, in the face of the congregation, to young people before admission to the Lord’s Supper.

At the close of this résumé, Dr Sprott goes on to state “ what the principal ideas are that should enter into a Form for the reception of Catechumens.”

‘ Confirmation,’ in the sense of one’s confirming his baptismal vow, is the invariable complement of infant baptism. “ The whole practical system of the Church is based on the baptismal covenant entered by the child and accepted by the young person.”

Preparation for this service, and the occasion itself, should be made much of, as there is no other season so powerful for good among the young when rightly utilised.

The reception of the catechumens should take place in the presence of the whole congregation. It is the owning of their baptism, their great public profession of faith in the Saviour, their solemn admission to full membership in the Church ; so that all reasons for public baptism in the case of adults apply also to it.

They should be asked such questions as the following : If they believe the articles of the Creed ? if they own and confirm their baptism ? if they are resolved to renounce sin and keep God’s commandments ? if they will submit to the discipline of the Church, abide in its fellowship, and give for the extension of the Gospel as God may prosper them ? These things are involved in Church membership ; and if they were made more prominent, people would have a better

idea than they have of their obligations as Christians. The Church has prescribed the questions to be put when office-bearers are ordained, and it should be equally explicit as to the terms of lay communion.

These questions being answered, the pastor, on behalf of the Church, should solemnly admit them to full membership, counsel them, and in prayer thank God for having spared them to profess their faith in Christ, and ask His grace and the aids of His Spirit to strengthen them for the Christian warfare. They should also be solemnly blessed. Calvin said: "The 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." This is no doubt the proper gesture of blessing, when it is possible to use it. In other cases the lifting up and stretching forth of the hands should take its place.

The *Form and Order for the Admission of Catechumens* in 'Euchologion,' 1869, generally embodying these ideas, has been widely used throughout the Church of Scotland, and is with minor variations the *Form and Order* of "Prayers for Divine Service."

II.

From the foregoing historical summary, it will be gathered that when the word Confirmation is used in the Church of Scotland it is all but invariably used in the sense of confirmation of the vows of Baptism. In this, our Church is typical of the Churches calling themselves Reformed. They make of Confirmation "a judicial act of authority, not a ministration, nor meant to be in itself a means of grace."¹ In the *Form and Order* in "Prayers for Divine Service," for example, after the questions put to the Catechumens have been satisfactorily answered, the Minister says:—

"For as much as ye have made these declarations and promises, I do now, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, the great King and Head of the Church, admit you to the full Communion of His Church, to the participation of the Lord's Supper, and to all the privileges of the Covenant of Grace. The very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."

¹ Wotherspoon, 'Religious Values,' p. 222.

This, as Dr Wotherspoon says, is not so much a ministration as a judicial act. There is no suggestion that Confirmation may be a confirmation in the sense that it is a corroboration—that, as Richard Baxter puts it, “corroborating grace is to be expected in it from God by all that come to it in sincerity of heart.”¹

It is a question which has never received adequate consideration in the Church of Scotland in recent times, whether or not we are justified in believing that God has a special blessing and gift to bestow in Confirmation. We have contented ourselves with laying the emphasis upon the part played by the Catechumen—in accepting the implications of the Baptismal Vow made by his sponsors, and in making public profession of the faith after instruction and approbation by the Pastor. The emphasis which might be laid upon the Divine part in Confirmation has always been avoided, for reasons which we shall examine later, with the result that many ministers and others feel that the ceremony as generally carried through, and as prescribed in the authorised *Form and Order* above-mentioned, is grievously defective.

In the seventeenth century at least two of the Puritan Divines in England endeavoured to persuade their brethren to retain the practice of Confirmation—Jonathan Hanmer, Vicar of Instow, who though an English priest became a Nonconformist in 1662; and Richard Baxter, who in 1648 published his ‘Confirmation and Restauration,’² with a view to the reconciliation of all parties on this thorny question. Hanmer’s ‘Teleiosis, or an Exercitation upon Confirmation’ had appeared previously with an epistle by Baxter prefixed to it.

Baxter argues in favour of some score of Propositions, the most interesting of which are the following :—

1. It is here supposed that the infants of believers should by Baptism be admitted into the Church, and so be partakers of infant privileges.
2. There are many privileges belonging to the adult members of the Church, which infant members are not capable of.
5. As a personal faith is the condition before God or title to the privileges of the adult; so the

¹ ‘Confirmation and Restauration,’ Proposition 12.

² In the Early Church the laying on of hands was practised for the restoration of penitents, as well as for confirmation of the baptised.

profession of this faith is the condition of his right before the Church; and without this profession he is not to be taken as an adult member, nor admitted to the privileges of such.

7. The profession of those that expect the Church state and privileges of the adult is to be tried, judged, and approved by the Pastors of the Church, to whose office it is that this belongeth.
10. To this ministerial approbation of the profession and qualification of the expectant there is to be adjoined a ministerial investiture, or delivery of the benefit expected.
12. This solemn investiture, on personal profession, being proved the ordinance of God . . . it must needs follow that it is a corroborating ordinance, and that corroborating grace is to be expected in it from God . . . and so it hath the name of Confirmation upon that account also.
19. So exceeding great and many are the mischiefs that have befallen us by the neglect of a solemn meet transition from an infant into an adult Church state, and which will undoubtedly continue till this be remedied, that all Magistrates, Ministers, and People that dissemble not in professing to be Christians, should with speed and diligence attempt the cure.

Baxter's argument is not without cogency for the present day. We are not satisfied with the present conditions of the "transition from an infant into an adult Church state"; and the crux of the dissatisfaction seems to lie in the absence of any "solemn investiture, or delivery of benefit expected." The important thing is not merely that the Catechumen should realise his privileges and responsibilities in being admitted "to the full Communion of the Church, to the participation of the Lord's Supper, and to all the privileges of the Covenant of Grace"; but also that he should realise that there is at that critical time and in that solemn occasion a renewal of God's grace, and a blessing of the Holy Spirit waiting to be received. "The utmost is not done," writes Dr Wotherspoon, "unless the transaction is represented to (the Catechumen) in sacramental symbol—unless the

moment and the occasion are offered to the Holy Spirit for giving and to the human soul for receiving.”¹

In the authorised *Form and Order* there is no sacramental symbol suggested, although the words of a Benediction are given—“The very God of peace sanctify you wholly.” The intention of the ceremony, as we have it here, does not seem to be the ministerial conveyance of any gift or blessing of God.

III.

Granted that some sacramental symbol be used, what will the symbol be, and what will the implications of its use amount to?

(a) In the Church of Scotland two symbols are, in fact, in current use—the lifting up and stretching forth of the hands as in Benediction over the Catechumens, and the laying of the hand upon the head of each Catechumen. The former is in very general use throughout the Church; the latter is practised in at least three congregations known to the writer.

In the ‘Liturgie’ of Pastor Bersier of Paris, which professes to be “a l’usage des Eglises Réformées,” the direction is given: “Le ministre posera sa main droite sur (la tête de chaque catéchumène) et prononcera les paroles suivantes: ‘N . . . N . . . je te confirme dans l’alliance du baptême, au nom du Père, du Fils, et du Saint-Esprit.’” This custom is not peculiar to Pastor Bersier’s congregation in Paris, but is found in several Churches in the North of France; while in others, “reçevant les catéchumènes du haut de la chaire, on fait le geste de la bénédiction analogue a celui de l’imposition des mains.”²

Dr Sprott, quoted above, reminds us of Calvin’s saying: “The 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.” To which Dr Sprott adds, “This is no doubt the proper gesture of blessing, when it is possible to use it. In other cases, the lifting up and stretching forth of the hands should take its place.”

There is no uniformity with regard to the sacramental

¹ ‘Religious Values,’ p. 217.

² Doumergue, ‘Essai Sur l’Histoire du Culte Réformé,’ p. 192. (Paris. 1890.)

symbol in use in those Churches called Catholic. The Church of Rome, which does not confirm before the Catechumen is at least seven years of age, and only after the reception of First Communion, for long discontinued the laying on of hands, the Bishop, after anointing the Catechumens with chrism, lifting up his hands and stretching them over the heads of the Catechumens. But in recent years the practice of the laying on of hands has been resumed. "The matter of Confirmation consists in the imposition of the hands of the Bishop, which we see indicated in the narrative of the Acts of the Apostles, and in the unction which he makes with holy chrism, in the form of a cross, upon the forehead of the Catechumen." ¹

In the Orthodox Eastern Church Confirmation is administered by the priest immediately after Baptism. The whole body is anointed with chrism, and the priest says the form: "The seal of the gift of the Holy Ghost. Amen." The baptised person, then also confirmed, is admitted to Communion eventually without further ceremony. There is no laying on of hands, except in the act of anointing.

In the Church of England the use has varied. At one period chrism was employed, then disused as at the present time. The Non-Jurors reintroduced the use of chrism; and some of them normally administered Confirmation to infants, as in the Eastern Church which they took for their model. Confirmation in the Church of England is now by the laying on of the hand of the Bishop.

There is no uniform custom. The raising of the hands over the heads of the Catechumens as in Benediction may be considered a sufficient symbol, although the laying on of the hand is more expressive, and has the added impressiveness of primitive custom.

(b) It is when we come to consider the implications of the use of a sacramental symbol in Confirmation that there may appear to be objection. For there is in the Reformed Church a traditional shyness of this ceremony.

1. It may be objected that Confirmation seems to do some indignity to the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, inasmuch as it has been called "the complement of Baptism," as if Baptism were not complete in itself. But does not our present inadequate custom itself suggest that there

¹ Mgr. Cauly, 'Cours d'Instruction Religieuse,' p. 321. (Paris. 1915.)

is need of just some "complement of Baptism"? As Baxter has it: "There are many privileges" (and therefore, we may add, responsibilities) "belonging to the adult members of the Church which infant members are not capable of." To become capable of these is surely to enter into a new and richer relation to God within the Covenant of Grace; and it is not hard to believe that God, who calls us into the holy fellowship of His Church, has special gifts to bestow—endowments for service, for example—at that critical time. In fact, are we not more than justified in so believing from the Apostolic practice as recorded in the Book of Acts? We nowhere read, in the New Testament, of the Holy Spirit being given in Baptism: the Holy Spirit was given by the laying on of the hands of the Apostles for the purpose apparently of further endowing the baptised person for service and witness in the Church. Dr Wotherspoon reminds us of the "distinction, often overlooked, between grace and gift. . . . There is that in which all Christians are alike: they are alive to God in Christ, and have all things that pertain to life and godliness: of this which is grace, Baptism is the Sacrament, the Holy Spirit the Agent. There is that also in which one Christian differs from another—one is Apostle, another Prophet, another speaks with tongues, and so on. This is gift not grace. But it is also an operation of the Spirit—"The same Spirit." . . . The distinction is between what one should be and what one can do." ¹

We suggest that any ministerial investiture of God's gift in Confirmation does not do indignity to Baptism. Rather does the practice of Infant Baptism call for such a ceremony with such an intention.²

2. It will also be objected that the Roman and Eastern Churches have made of Confirmation a sacrament, and have overlaid it with the use of chrism and so on. This was the main objection of Calvin and other Reformers. After a description of what he considered to be the primitive usage, Calvin writes: "Succeeding times have almost obliterated that ancient practice (*i.e.*, the laying on of hands), and introduced I know not what counterfeit confirmation as a sacrament of God. . . . This confirmation is performed by unction and the following form of

¹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 206, 207.

² Ministers who have had the experience of knowing young people of their flock being "rebaptised" by Baptists will sympathise deeply with the writer's point here.

words: 'I sign thee with the sign of the cross, and confirm thee with the oil of salvation, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.' All this sounds very beautifully and pleasantly. But where is the word of God which promises the presence of the Holy Spirit in this ceremony? They cannot allege a single iota. . . . Augustine says, 'Let the Word be added to the element, and it will become a sacrament.' Let the Romanists produce this word, if they wish us to contemplate in the oil anything beyond the oil itself."¹ We quote Calvin at that length in order to show what his objection was to Confirmation as practised by the Roman Church in his day. It was an objection to a so-called sacrament, of which the matter was chrism, round which superstitions had gathered and clung. His objection was not to a Confirmation by way of the laying on of hands as in Benediction, a ceremony which he found not merely tolerable but positively commendable.

Merely that Confirmation has been considered a sacrament is no reason for objecting to it. Otherwise we should object to Marriage and to Ordination. As John Forbes of Corse wrote in his '*Irenicon*': "It is objected that the Papists have abused it by making it, like Matrimony or Penance, a Sacrament. But will you on that ground—i.e., the Papists' abuse—proceed to abolish the Lord's Prayer, the Holy Communion, and the Invocation of the Trinity? Sometimes, I grant, abolition may be necessary owing to abuse; but not as a permanent measure, or in every case; and sometimes abolition is definitely wrong."² The English Church has retained Confirmation since the Reformation and not counted it a Sacrament, until in recent times some Anglo-Catholics have done so.

That Confirmation with the use of some sacramental symbol must always be a sacramental ceremony, cannot be denied. But Benediction is a sacramental ceremony, and it is for the recognition of Confirmation as a sacramental ceremony within the Ministry of Benediction that we plead. But we have no wish, nor do we think it justifiable to consider Confirmation a sacrament. We maintain that Holy Baptism and the Supper of the Lord should be by themselves considered in a unique sense the Sacraments of Grace.

3. In the 'Re-Examination of the Perth Articles,' attri-

¹ '*Christian Institutes*,' IV., xix., 5.

² E. G. Selwyn's edition of the First Book of the '*Irenicon*,' p. 55. (Cambridge. 1923.)

buted to David Calderwood, Confirmation is repudiated as having for its purpose the exaltation of the Bishop's office ; and there can be no doubt that this was one of the chief reasons for the rejection of Confirmation, or "Bishoping" as it was called (*e.g.*, in the 'Articles of Perth'), by the majority of the Kirk. That Confirmation does exalt the Bishop's office is certainly suggested in so recent a book as that of Dr E. G. Selwyn's already quoted, for he writes: "In the Church of England the increased care and attention bestowed during the last half-century upon Confirmation has tended to bring the Bishop as a father in God into an ever closer and more inward relation to the practical religion of Churchmen."¹ Whether or not that will be a recommendation of Confirmation to Presbyterian Churchmen, we do not stop to consider. But it must be remembered that the reservation of Confirmation to Bishops is not universal throughout the Churches calling themselves Catholic, nor has it been the invariable use in any of these Churches except, perhaps, the Anglican. In the Orthodox Eastern Church Confirmation is administered by the priest, not by the Bishop, immediately after Baptism: only he must use chrism blessed on Maundy Thursday by the Œcumenical Patriarch, to whom this right alone pertains. Of this Dr Adrian Fortescue, the learned Roman liturgiologist says: "It should be noted that we (*i.e.*, the Roman Catholic Church) recognise this as valid Confirmation, our Uniates do so too, and no Latin bishop ever thinks of reconfirming a convert from Orthodoxy." In a note on this passage, Dr Fortescue goes on to say: "This fact ought to sufficiently answer the question whether a priest can validly confirm. It is known that the Pope gives leave to do so to certain Latin priests in missions. But he cannot by an act of jurisdiction give them any new *potestas ordinis*."² Even in the West, Presbyterial Confirmation was very common and probably general in the early days when Bishops were few.³

It may be, therefore, that the reservation of Confirmation to the Bishop was meant to exalt the Episcopal office ; but Confirmation is not necessarily an Episcopal function, it belongs historically to the *potestas ordinis* of the Presbyter.

It seems to us only reasonable that, other things

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 22.

² 'The Orthodox Eastern Church,' p. 421. (London. 1920.)

³ Wordsworth, 'Ministry of Grace,' pp. 59 and 82. (London. 1901.)

being equal, the Minister of Baptism should be the Minister of Confirmation also.

IV.

It belongs to the office of the Pastor, as an ordinary and perpetual officer in the Church, to bless the people from God. So it stands written in our Form of Church Government. We have not made enough of our Ministry of Benediction. We have left it a vague and indefinite thing, and have not sought to give it in practice the rich significance it ought to have. In the early days of the Church the Ministry of Benediction was a rich and significant thing, as, for example, in this appropriate passage from Tertullian's 'De Baptismo':—

“Not that we receive the Holy Spirit in the baptismal waters; but having been cleansed in the water under the ministry of the angel, we are there prepared for the Holy Spirit. . . . Then, on stepping forth from the Font, we are anointed with consecrated oil—a custom derived from the Old Testament dispensation in which men used to be anointed priests with oil out of a horn. . . . After that, the hand is laid upon us, in benediction invoking and inviting the Holy Spirit. . . . Then that most Holy Spirit comes down willingly from the Father upon the bodies which have been cleansed and blessed: He broods over the waters of Baptism as if recognising there His ancient throne.”¹

Were we to adopt the use of a sacramental symbol in Confirmation, we maintain that it would imply no more and no less than that God has gifts to bestow by the Holy Ghost upon the Catechumen as, with sincerity of heart and after examination as to his qualifications as far as men can judge of them, he lays upon himself the responsibilities and accepts for himself the privileges of the adult Church state: and that, in this “ministerial investiture or delivery of the benefit expected” (a function included within the Ministry of Benediction), “the moment and the occasion are offered to the Holy Spirit for giving and to the human soul for receiving.”

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¹ Quoted from Mason, 'Relation of Confirmation to Baptism,' pp. 60, 61. (London. 1893).