

30/05 Administration of Confirmation by Presbyters

(A report from the Diocesan Doctrine Commission)

Terms of reference

1. On the 10 October 2000 the Synod resolved to appoint a committee (the Committee) to report on the possibility, from a theological, historical, ecumenical, pastoral and legal point of view, that –
 - (a) Confirmation no longer be required after adult baptism;
 - (b) Confirmation be administered by Presbyters and appropriate laypersons as well as Bishops; and
 - (c) Presbyters and appropriate laypersons, as well as Bishops, be enabled to receive into Anglican fellowship communicant members of other Christian denominations.
2. The report of the Committee ('14/00 Administration of confirmation by presbyters') was presented to the Synod with a Minority Report appended.
3. Prior to this report being presented to Synod, the Standing Committee resolved –

“that the majority and minority versions of the report be sent to the Sydney Diocesan Doctrine Commission for its consideration and report back to the Standing Committee. “

Exposition

The Majority Report

4. The Majority Report argues that –
 - (a) Any change in current practice ought to be tested by Scripture (item 5).
 - (b) The New Testament teaches a one-stage rite of initiation, not a two-stage (items 5–9).
 - (c) There was a movement towards a two-stage rite from Hippolytus or Tertullian onwards (items 10–11), and the West eventually preferred the laying-on-of-hands to be done by the Bishop, whereas the East allowed both rites to the Presbyter.
 - (d) Confirmation was considered a sacrament by the 12th century (item 11).
 - (e) The age of Confirmation was usually quite young, but the tendency grew to make the lowest age seven, and this was fixed by Council of Trent (item 12).
 - (f) The reformers rejected the view that Confirmation is a sacrament (item 13–15), and by the English Prayer Book of 1552 the act of Confirmation was reduced to a prayer.
 - (g) The 1662 Book of Common Prayer introduced a more substantial Confirmation service, as well as a service of Baptism for those of Riper Years (item 16). The latter anticipated that those baptised would be confirmed by the Bishop as soon as possible to allow admission to the Holy Communion.
 - (h) In regard to the Confirmation of those baptised as infants –
 - (i) The reformation teaching of the Church of England remodelled Confirmation for those baptised as infants to be a profession of faith, to enable partaking of the Lord's Supper on the basis of their own repentance and faith (item 17).
 - (ii) The reformation teaching of the Church of England saw that 'the presence of the bishop gave expression to the wider church as a witness to the promises of God being owned by the individual' (item 17).
 - (iii) 'There are good theological, pastoral and ecumenical reasons for retaining the rite of Confirmation', namely, allowing an opportunity for profession of faith publicly (item 18).
 - (iv) Since this is a profession of a shared faith, it is appropriate to have the Bishop present 'as a representative of the wider church, not merely the immediate congregation', however, there is no reason why he should conduct the rite; he could license a Presbyter to do so, as is already allowed in Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran, and Uniting Churches (item 18).
 - (v) Although there are no theological objections, 'there would be significant ecumenical (let alone legal) difficulties' in allowing laypersons to conduct the Confirmation service, which is taken as an exclusion of the Presbyter from the ceremony (item 19).

- (vi) Senior laypersons are better utilised in preparation of candidates for Confirmation, and for presentation of candidates to Presbyter/Bishop in the service, 'thus demonstrating the importance of the faith of the individual being a shared faith of the whole church' (item 19).
- (i) In regard to the Confirmation of those baptised as adults –
 - (i) The two-stage rite of initiation is post-apostolic and Scripture does not warrant it being made mandatory for all believers, or as a prerequisite for admission to Holy Communion, and Article 25 regards its status as a sacrament as a corruption (item 20).
 - (ii) The reformers viewed Confirmation as a complement to infant baptism (item 20), and the introduction of the service of adult baptism did not properly articulate its relation to Confirmation. There is no theological need for the Confirmation of someone baptised as an adult (item 21).
 - (iii) In practice there is usually a delay of Confirmation until the Bishop is available. Because this is 'undesirable' Confirmation should be dispensed with, or there should be no delay in the imposition of hands as a sign of fellowship (item 21).
 - (iv) There are no theological objections for removing the requirement of Confirmation for adult baptisands, but good reason to continue it as 'a sign of fellowship and identification', being akin to a handshake or congregational applause (item 22).
 - (v) There are ecumenical reasons for retaining the practice (although these are not stated) (item 22).
 - (vi) There are 'no compelling arguments to abolish "laying on of hands" for adult baptisands, as long as it is not viewed as an essential requirement for admission to Holy Communion' (item 22), for this has no warrant in Scripture (item 23) and is contrary to Church of England practice (item 24).
 - (vii) To overcome the problem of delay, the rite of laying on of hands could be delegated to the Presbyter who conducted the baptism, with much to be gained 'pastorally, theologically and ecumenically', i.e. a sign of welcome, allowance of partaking in communion immediately, and consistent with current practice in other denominations.
 - (viii) Confirmation by senior laypersons is more problematic, for it would be strange unless they also administered the baptism, and it would be better to have them involved in preparation or sponsorship of the candidates.
- (j) From a legal point of view –
 - (i) Confirmation is not required for admission as a member of the Anglican Church of Australia, or to be a parishioner of a church in the Diocese of Sydney, or for becoming a communicant member (item 27). It is, however, 'obvious that confirmation is the normal means whereby a person is considered a communicant member' (item 28).
 - (ii) Legislation would have to be passed by synod or General Synod to allow Confirmation by a Presbyter.

The Majority Report recommendations

5. The Majority Report recommends that –
 - (a) Confirmation not be required of those baptised as adults before they are admitted to communion (item 29).
 - (b) Presbyters, under licence from the Archbishop, be allowed to administer Confirmation (item 30) and to receive communicants of other denominations into fellowship of the Anglican church (item 32).
 - (c) the involvement of senior laypersons in catechetical preparation of Confirmation candidates be encouraged (item 31).
 - (d) Standing Committee take steps towards introducing legislation to these ends (item 33).

The Minority Report

6. The argument of the Minority Report is that –
 - (a) There are unacceptable difficulties with the Majority Report's handling of the New Testament evidence and with the exclusion of senior lay persons from administering Confirmation (item 1).

- (b) The New Testament does not give water baptism the place given it by the Majority Report. Most of the New Testament references to baptism are not referring to water baptism, but are metaphorical. Baptism and our practice of it needs to be understood against the twofold New Testament foundation of 'the baptism of Jesus Christ, which is his death on the cross', which is the baptism that saves; and the distinctive baptism which Jesus Christ brings, that is, the baptism of the Holy Spirit (item 2).
- (c) The claim (item 9) that water baptism is 'the dominically authorised means of making disciples' is unhelpful, as the means of making disciples is the proclamation of the gospel met by repentance and faith (item 3).
- (d) There are 'very important pastoral and ecumenical reasons for including senior lay persons' for administration of Confirmation. Confirmation, like all symbolic actions engaged in by Christians 'ought to point clearly towards the truths of the apostolic gospel, not away from them'. To exclude laypersons is seriously misleading in our current context.
- (e) In the current context, the prevailing view of spiritual reality within Anglicanism is a catholic (item 4) view of a sacramental universe (item 5), in which God's blessing flows downwards through the performance of sacramental acts by duly ordained Bishops, Priests and Deacons. Without this three-fold order, the church is not truly constituted or its actions valid. The absolute necessity for Episcopal Confirmation falls within this belief system.
- (f) The evangelical reformers of the Continental and English churches rejected the sacramental working of God in favour of his direct work through word and spirit. Because Christ therefore rules directly, lay people could in principle administer sacraments. Administration of Confirmation (and communion) is consistent with lay people being able to baptise, for all three are spiritual ministries, which belong in principle not just to clergy but to laity as well.
- (g) In the Sydney context, to exclude laypersons from administration of Confirmation, especially given the heightened situation introduced by discussion of lay persons' involvement with Holy Communion, is 'to avoid offering a corrective to a wrong view of spiritual reality. Licensing senior lay people serves both our own constituency and the wider Christian community in Australia with a positive indication of the truth'.
- (h) In summary, the Minority Report offers the theological argument that our practice should clearly demonstrate a non-sacramental view of life; and some contextual/ pragmatic reasons which can be summarised into two key principles: the endorsement of the laity of our own diocese (a pastoral reason), and offering leadership to those in error in the wider Anglican communion (an 'ecumenical' reason).

The Minority Report recommendation

7. The Minority Report recommends that 'presbyter and senior laypersons' replace all occurrences of 'presbyter' in the recommendations of the report.

Points at Issue

8. It is important to distinguish the recommendations from the reports themselves.

The recommendations

9. In regard to the recommendations –
- (a) There is no dispute over the recommendation that Confirmation should not be required of adult baptisands before admission to Holy Communion (item 29), nor that senior laypersons may be involved in catechetical preparation (item 31), nor that the consequential administrative recommendation that Standing Committee prepare appropriate legislation (item 33).
 - (b) There is also no dispute over the recommendation that the administration of Confirmation (item 30) and Reception of communicant members of other denominations (item 32) should be extended to Presbyters, under licence from the Archbishop.
 - (c) The single dispute concerns the Minority Report's recommendation (Minority Report, item 8) that the administration of Confirmation and Reception of communicant members of other denominations should be extended, not only to Presbyters, but also to senior laypersons.

The reports

10. In regard to the reports themselves, one item has been overlooked by both, and there are two matters under dispute between them –

- (a) Neither report provides explicit argument in relation to the Reception of communicant members of other denominations. This was specifically requested by the Synod and the Majority Report made a recommendation without any discussion (item 32).
- (b) The Minority Report's first matter of dispute is 'the handling of the New Testament evidence' in regard to the Majority Report's assumptions regarding water baptism (Minority Report, items 1, 2 and 3).
- (c) The Minority Report's second dispute is with sections 18, 19, 25, arguing that, contrary to the Majority Report, there are 'very important pastoral and ecumenical reasons for including senior lay people' in Confirmation, namely, the endorsement of a proper view of spiritual reality, in opposition to a sacramental view (Minority Report, items 4–6). Thus, putting into practice a better theology is necessary pastorally and ecumenically.

The New Testament evidence on baptism

11. In regard to the issue of baptism, the Majority Report fails to engage with an interpretative tradition that is long-standing and strongly held within Sydney Diocese, largely due to the influence of Donald Robinson, Broughton Knox, and many of those taught by them.¹

12. On the other hand, the Minority Report, although representing this tradition, does not expound it.

13. Additional problems could also be raised with the presentation of baptism in both reports. For example, there was no real discussion of baptism according to the Anglican formularies in either report. Certain statements in the Majority Report seem to indicate that the rite of water baptism is actually essential to, or sufficient for, the Christian life and so to salvation.² Notwithstanding the statement in the Catechism that there are only two sacraments 'generally necessary to salvation', this matter deserves more attention.

14. However, the arguments and recommendations of the Majority Report in regard to Confirmation do not depend upon its comments on baptism.

15. In summary: the Majority and Minority Report reflect different views of baptism but neither argues its case. This discussion, however, is ultimately unnecessary for this report on Confirmation.

Confirmation administered by appropriate lay-persons.

16. This matter goes to the heart of the issue between the Majority and Minority Reports.

17. Both Reports agree that Confirmation is not a sacrament (Article XXV, cf. XXVII and XXVIII), and that it is neither biblically nor theologically mandated. Therefore the question becomes: Should the continuation of a practice of this character be restricted to the Bishop, extended to the Presbyter, or further extended to appropriate lay-persons?

18. There is some difficulty in identifying the kind of argument that is required to decide the question. While there is no decisive theological argument, the practice may be considered *appropriate* or *inappropriate* to a theological position, because of perceived *symbolic* significances (such as the Bishop representing fellowship with the wider church, or a lay person representing God's direct working by his

¹ See D.B. Knox, 'New Testament Baptism' and 'Addition to manuscript on baptism', in *D. Broughton Knox. Selected Works Volume II: Church and Ministry* (K. Birkett, ed.; Kingsford: Matthias Media, 2003), 263–315; D. Robinson, *The Meaning of Baptism* (A Falcon Booklet; London Church Pastoral Aid Society, 1959 [original 1956]); 'The Doctrine of Baptism', *Churchman* 76.2 (1962), 83–89; 'Born of Water and the Spirit: Does John 3:15 Refer to Baptism?', *RTR* 25.1 (1966), 15–23; 'Towards a Definition of Baptism', *RTR* 34.1 (1975), 1–15. Donald Robinson's essays will soon be available in an edition of his *Works* (forthcoming).

² These statements are:

'A Christian disciple, therefore, is a baptised follower of Jesus';

'the teaching of the apostles identifies baptism as a distinguishing mark of those who belong to God's people under the new covenant' (item 5 – specifically objected to by Minority Report, item 2);

'... [no] indication that the rite [i.e. of laying on of hands] was a universally necessary one, beyond the initiatory rite of baptism' (item 7);

[citing Dunnill]: 'the Spirit-empowering significance of baptism' (item 8);

'the unmistakable rite of baptism as the dominically authorised means of making disciples' (item 9 -- specifically objected to by Minority Report, item 3);

'theologically, the baptism of an adult is complete in terms of their incorporation into Christ' (item 21);

'... their baptism is sufficient for them to be counted among the many members of the one body who eat of the one bread' (item 23).

word). However, the Commission is not convinced of the decisive nature of any one symbolic understanding of Confirmation.

19. The Majority Report speaks of two aspects of Confirmation: the prayer on behalf of the confirmer led by the Bishop and profession of faith by the confirmer. Although acknowledging the former aspect at important points,³ the Majority Report clearly treats the second aspect as predominant.

20. However the Prayer Books of 1549, 1552 and 1662 present Confirmation as essentially an act of prayer.

21. The need for a profession of faith in association with Confirmation is a most important Reformation innovation. Deliberately correcting the pre-reformation view, which held that the Bishop imparted grace to the child through the laying on of hands, irrespective of the understanding or faith of the child, the reformers introduced instruction in the faith by means of the Catechism. This instruction, however, was prior to and preparatory for the Confirmation, rather than being, strictly speaking, part of the Confirmation itself.

22. 'Profession of faith' is referred to in the prefaces to the Order for Confirmation in both 1549 and 1552, but this is in the context of deciding the appropriate age for Confirmation. The 'age of discretion' is when the children can confess with their own mouth the faith professed on their behalf by their Godparents; just before the age when they begin to be in danger to fall into sin; and of an age when they can promise to be obedient to the will of God. Children at this 'age of discretion' were to be instructed by the Curate and then, when properly instructed, brought to the Bishop for Confirmation.

23. The act of Confirmation proper is prayer offered on behalf of the confirmer. In 1549 the rite included the sign of the cross and a prayer from the Bishop that God would 'send downe from heauen ... thy holy gost the comforter'. Presumably because this was still capable of the medieval understanding of the rite imparting the Spirit, the 1552 book clarified the situation by praying: 'strengthen them ... with the holy gost the comforter'. In addition, the sign of the cross was dropped and a further prayer was added, to be said while the Bishop laid his hands upon the children severally, 'Defend O Lord ...'. Thus, the Majority Report (Item 15) is exactly right to summarise by saying, 'the act of confirmation was thereby ceremoniously reduced to a prayer'.

24. Canon 60 of the 1604 Canons shows that Confirmation was at that stage still regarded as an act of 'prayer and blessing' for those who have already been catechised –

"Forasmuch as it hath been a solemn, ancient, and laudable custom in the church of God, continued from the Apostles' times, that all Bishops should lay their hands upon children, and instructed in the Catechism of Christian Religion, praying over them and blessing them, which we commonly call *Confirmation* ..."

25. The innovation of 1662 Book of Common Prayer, however, was to place a summary of the material relating to the 'age of discretion', which both 1549 and 1552 had in the preface of the Order, into the service for Confirmation. Now the service began with the Bishop asking the confirmer to 'renew the solemn promise and vow that was made in your name at your Baptism; ratifying and confirming the same in your own persons, ...'. Despite this change, however, this is still clearly a preparatory step, and the Confirmation proper consists of the prayer on behalf of the confirmer.

26. Although not a sacrament itself, this reformation view of Confirmation as prayer is entirely consistent with the reformation view of the sacraments as signs given by God. It is also consistent with the baptism service, whose essence is also prayer on behalf of the child, which prays for the child's reception of God's gift of salvation. Just as the congregation prayed for the infant child at their baptism, the Confirmation service allows this prayer to be confirmed for the child⁴ who has reached the age of discretion, and who therefore (after due instruction) takes hold of God's promises 'in their own person'.

27. It is therefore problematic to overlook the *preparatory* role of the 'profession of faith' and to allow it to eclipse prayer as the true essence of Confirmation. To do so will tend towards Confirmation becoming

³ For example, Majority Report, item 19, note 19, while arguing that there is no theological objection to a layperson conducting a Confirmation service, cites 'Augustine's famous phrase', 'What other is the laying on of hands but prayer over a man?' (De Bapt. Contra Donat. iii. 16, cited by J. Calvin, Ins. IV.xix.12).

⁴ 'In the first English Prayer Books (1549 to 1604), although instruction and testing is closely linked to Confirmation, there was no ratification of baptismal promises in the order of Confirmation itself. Thus it is clear that the term "Confirmation" refers, not to the ratification of promises, but to the Bishop's prayer and blessing'. (D.W.B. Robinson, 'Integrating Youth into the Full Life and Work of the Church', An essay on Confirmation', in *Works* [Forthcoming]).

an event focused upon other human beings, rather than one in which there is an encounter between the confirmer in his/her congregation and God.

28. If the essential act of Confirmation is prayer for the confirmer, then there is no compelling theological reason why appropriate lay-persons should be excluded from such an act.

Conclusions and Recommendations

29. The reports highlight two apparently irreconcilable understandings of baptism.

30. The Doctrine Commission endorses the view of both reports that a Presbyter could be permitted, in appropriate circumstances, to conduct Confirmation.

31. The arguments mounted in the Majority Report for the restriction of the act of Confirmation to ordained clergy are not convincing.

32. The Doctrine Commission agrees that Confirmation is not, and should not be, a requirement for communicant membership.

For and on behalf of the Diocesan Doctrine Commission

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