

## **A Brief History of Confirmation**

There are three main periods in the history of the Rite of Confirmation:

1. The early centuries (2nd to 4th centuries);
2. The early medieval period (5th to 11th centuries);
3. The central medieval period to modern times and recent developments.

### **The Early Centuries (2nd to 4th Centuries)**

In the 2nd to the 4th centuries, those desiring to be Christians entered into the catechumenate (a period of preparation for baptism) which culminated in the solemn initiation ceremony of the Easter Vigil. This is the procedure by which people became Christians – nearly always adults – and the preparation was usually about three years in duration. The initiation rites had this basic structure:

- Baptism
- Post-baptismal anointing
- Prayer and imposition of the hands
- Anointing the forehead for the gift of the Spirit, i.e., Confirmation

So Confirmation was celebrated immediately after baptism as part of the initiation rite. The prayer, imposition of the hands and the anointing the forehead for the gift of the Spirit constituted the essential rites of Confirmation.

### **The Early Medieval Period (5th to 11th Centuries)**

Around the beginning of the 5th century, the conferring of Confirmation gradually became separated from baptism. In its origins this development was purely practical and in no way involved any doctrinal or theological position. This development was determined by the significant increase in the Christian population over the 4th century following the Peace of Constantine (313 AD) and the consequent spread of organized Christian communities into the smaller towns and countryside.

In these circumstances it proved impossible to maintain the traditional practice of one annual ceremony of initiation at the Easter Vigil presided over by the bishop. Instead, priests were now permitted to administer baptism in the outlying churches and later those baptized were expected to receive confirmation from the bishop either in the cathedral church or when the bishop was visiting the churches of his diocese.

Two observations are important concerning this development. First, it was an attempt to maintain the unity of Christian initiation, and the role of the bishop in it in a very new situation. Second, the development soon proved a rather theoretical solution and it did not work. It became harder, if not impossible for people in the outlying districts to visit the cathedral church to receive confirmation or to receive a visit from their bishop. It was the intention of the church, that those requiring Confirmation should receive it as soon as possible after baptism. However, the interval between baptism and confirmation varied immensely, with the tendency over the years for the time gap to increase between the reception of these two sacraments.

## **The Central Medieval Period to Modern Times (12th Century to the Present)**

From the central medieval period to modern times very little change occurred in the rite of Confirmation. In America, Confirmation came slowly to be a regular practice (since it required both the presence of bishops, a reality on American soil only in the late eighteenth century, and a ready means of travel, vastly improved with the advent of the railroad in the nineteenth century). As Confirmation became more customary, Anglicans began to debate the meaning of Confirmation in relation to baptism, a debate that lasted until nearly the end of the twentieth century.

With the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, the emphasis was returned to baptism as the primary rite of Christian initiation. When the Episcopal Church began drafting the new initiatory rites, the question was still not settled. But there was growing scholarly consensus that initiation in the early church was accomplished in a single rite comprising administration of water, anointing, laying on of hands, and consignation, culminating in admission to communion. This is why children are allowed to receive communion upon baptism.

For Episcopalians, confirmation, though not a sacrament of initiation, is a gateway to additional responsibilities and privileges of membership. The canons require a person to be a “confirmed adult communicant in good standing” to hold a number of elected or appointed offices and to be ordained.

### **Adult Confirmation**

According to the Book of Common Prayer (page 412), “Those baptized as adults, unless baptized with the laying on of hands by a bishop, are also expected to make a public affirmation of their faith and commitment to the responsibilities of their faith and commitment to the responsibilities of their baptism in the presence of a bishop and to receive the laying on of hands.” So confirmation, if not undertaken as a teenager, is still a normative part of Christian faith and development.

### **Confirmation vs. Reception**

People who have been confirmed by a bishop in another tradition (usually Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox) are Received rather than Confirmed by a bishop when they choose to affiliate with the Episcopal Church. This is generally preceded by some instruction at the parish level about the life, faith, and worship of the Episcopal Church. Those who have been baptized in other, non-sacramental traditions are not “re-baptized” but are Confirmed when they join the Episcopal Church.

### **Scriptural Basis for Confirmation**

Acts 8:14-17 is generally cited as the Biblical basis for Confirmation. “Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit; for it had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.”