

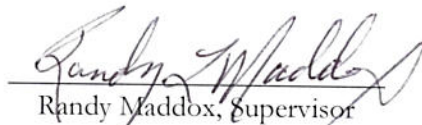
The End of Confirmation in American Methodism

by

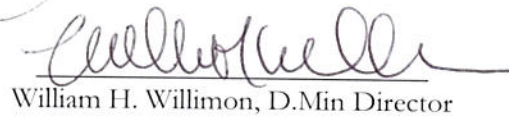
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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry
in the Divinity School of Duke University

2019

ABSTRACT

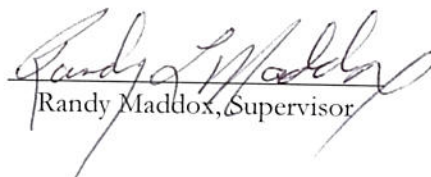
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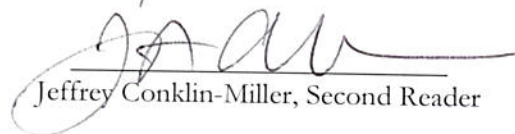
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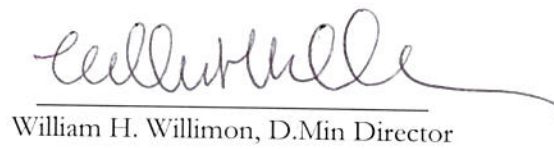
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Abstract

American Methodism existed without a rite of confirmation from 1784 to 1965. This study seeks to understand the distinctive problems and possibilities emerging from Wesleyan theology and Methodist history that inform our engagement in the broader Protestant conversation about rites of initiation and the formation of children and youth. After taking a brief look at the current landscape of youth and religion in American life through the lens of practical theology and sociology, this study turns to important historical and theological questions: How did the rite of confirmation emerge in the West in general and in the Church of England in particular? Why did Wesley remove the rite of confirmation from the 1784 *Sunday Service*? What were the consequences for American Methodism? Why was it reintroduced? How should we approach confirmation now?

This study argues that John Wesley was not oblivious to questions of *initiation*. However, the removal of a rite of confirmation suggests that he was less interested in a single ritual event in which one received a bestowal of the Holy Spirit or made a one-time profession of faith. The burden of his ministry was to create thick communities of discipleship formation and to motivate and incentivize *continued participation* in the way of salvation through the means of grace in Spirit-filled community.

This end, that is, this aim—*continued participation* in the way of salvation through the means of grace in Spirit-filled community—must shape all Methodist theological reflection and liturgical rites of initiation.

Dedication

For Millie, Thomas, Micah, and Bolen that you may grow to trust evermore in the grace of God you received through water and the Spirit.

For the late Reverend Doctor Roy Dean McAlilly, pioneer of my faith and vocation, my love of learning and desire for God.

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I could not have written this without my family. I want to acknowledge my father for his constant mentorship and my mother for reading the entire thesis with great care. I want to acknowledge also my in-laws, Mike and Carolyn Tucker, for the untold hours spent caring for us and our children over the last two years.

Finally, I do not have the words express the depth of my gratitude to my wife, Millie, whose steadfast love, constant encouragement, and daily sacrifices have given me confidence in my vocation and space to bring this work to completion.

Introduction

Like many other pastors, I hear a lot of valuable information from my congregation in the five minutes before and after a worship service. Congregants pass along prayer concerns. They share juicy gossip. They weigh in on committee decisions. They wonder about ministry ideas. They ask impossibly hard theological questions. And sometimes they reveal what is really going on.

A couple of years ago, I was standing in the narthex waiting for the processional hymn when one of the members of the choir approached me. “How are things going?” he asked. “Things are going very well,” I answered. “What are you working on these days?” he replied. “Well,” I said, “we are starting a new confirmation class. I have been making preparations for it.” “That’s great!” he responded. “Listen. Do you think it would be ok if I sent my three boys through confirmation again? They are in college now. The first time didn’t seem to take.”

The North African church father, Tertullian, famously wrote that Christians are made, not born. For years I had secretly worried whether the time, energy, and effort I was investing with our confirmation classes was doing much towards the end of making faithful Christians out of the sixth graders who dutifully showed up and went through the motions. Here was another anecdote suggesting that the discipleship programs of our church were not “working.” I worried, in a way that I had never before, that confirmation, at least the way we were doing it, was broken.

I come to this research as an ordained elder in the United Methodist Church. I have

worked as a practitioner of ministry, particularly in the area of discipleship formation, for eleven years—as a student pastor, as a pastor of small membership church, as the chair of the Board of Discipleship in the annual conference, and, currently, as an associate pastor of a large membership church. In my current position, I oversee the discipleship formation of children, youth, college students, and adults. One of my responsibilities is to administer the yearly confirmation class. The process of confirmation is widely viewed in our congregation as a vibrant, successful program.

In our church, confirmation begins with a weekend retreat with confirmands from other United Methodist churches at a local camp. For three months, thirty sixth-graders gather weekly on Sunday afternoons at round tables. Each confirmand has an adult mentor. One of the pastors offers instruction loosely based on Will Willimon’s mentor-based confirmation curriculum, *Making Disciples*, which focuses on major doctrines. The process culminates on “Confirmation Sunday” which customarily falls on the low-attendance Sunday following Easter. The placement is pragmatic, not theological. During the “Confirmation Sunday” service, the entire confirmation class will renounce their sin and profess their faith in Jesus Christ. Some of the youth are baptized and confirmed. Others were baptized as infants and are confirmed at the end of the process. While laying hands on each kneeling confirmand, the pastors say these words: “The Holy Spirit work within you that being born by water and the Spirit you may be a faithful follower of Jesus Christ.” Occasionally, there is a young person who opts not to be confirmed, but it is exceedingly rare. After the worship service, the church hosts a luncheon for the confirmands and their families. At the luncheon,

our Director of Youth Ministry addresses the confirmands and their parents encouraging them to be a part of the youth group. Some of them will. Many will not. We evaluate it every year. Is our confirmation process “working?” Are we making faithful followers of Jesus Christ?

Each May for Baccalaureate Sunday, the youth group creates “Senior Videos.” The videos are an opportunity for each high school senior to tell a little about how our church has impacted their lives and what they will be doing in the coming year. We began to notice that, when we asked about their most meaningful experience at our church, many of the students referenced confirmation. Perhaps this was a sign that the program was working! I asked our youth director. She said that only 25-30% of the high school seniors remained connected to the youth group after the completion of the confirmation process. Maybe participation in youth group should not be the measure of a vibrant faith in Christ, but it raises a number of questions. Why was our confirmation process failing to connect students to the youth group? Do students and parents view confirmation as something akin to graduation? Why do our youth and their families seem to view confirmation as an ending rather than a beginning?

When I began my research for this thesis, I assumed that my claim would be simple: the process of confirmation is broken. At least for one tribe of Christians, the American Methodists, the process of confirmation does not always function very well to form adolescents in the faith of Jesus Christ, nor does it ensure that they will continue to be members of the body of Christ when they graduate from high school. My research suggests,

however, that the story is more complex than I had initially imagined. There is both more vibrancy in the work of confirmation across American Protestantism than I had realized and more serious historical and theological questions about the practice of confirmation for the heirs of John Wesley than I had imagined. The moment is ripe to explore the practice of confirmation in the Wesleyan tradition.

While a lot of new curriculum for confirmation has been produced for American Methodism recently—Cokesbury’s *Confirm and Credo*, Sparkhouse’s *Collaborate*, Seedbed’s *The Absolute Basics of the Christian Faith* by Phil Tallon, a reprinting of Will Willimon’s *Making Disciples*—I have come to believe that practitioners of discipleship in local churches need more than the creation of another new curriculum. What is needed is a more thorough evaluation of our basic assumptions.

Confirmation touches the core of our life together: salvation, ecclesiology, sacraments, catechesis, initiation into membership in the body of Christ. It allows us to ask important questions. How do we initiate people into God’s mighty acts of salvation? How do we incorporate people in the body of Christ? How do young people come to know and love the Triune God? How and when do we receive the Holy Spirit? How do we teach the faith to the next generation? How do we make real Christians?

This thesis surveys current landscape of confirmation practices and religious formation of youth in America and then examines historical reasons and theological presuppositions which shape the practice of confirmation in American Methodism. American Methodism began without a rite of confirmation. John Wesley did not include the

rite of confirmation from *The Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America: With Other Occasional Services* published on September 10, 1784, a resource provided for the purposes of shaping the liturgical life of Methodism in America. A formal rite of confirmation was reintroduced for The Methodist Church in the 1965 *Book of Worship for Church and Home*. So from 1784 until 1964, American Methodism existed without a rite of confirmation. Why did Wesley remove the rite? What were the consequences for American Methodism? Why was it reintroduced? How should we approach confirmation now?

Examining why Wesley removed the rite requires understanding the development of the rite of confirmation in the West in general and the Church of England in particular. The task of understanding the consequences for American Methodism involves tracing the evolution of theological interpretation about the meaning and purpose of confirmation. Examining the historical and theological background will also help to explain why the rite of confirmation was reintroduced and to shape the conversation about how American Methodists should approach confirmation now.

The ambiguity in the West about normative practices of initiation stems from a tension between the objective and sacramental action of God and the subjective and experiential human response. At the level of ritual practice, the question becomes where to place the invocation of the Holy Spirit and the gesture of laying on hands—do we place it during the sacrament of baptism (in a practice akin to *chrismation* in the East) or later during confirmation (in a practice akin to the Western rite interpreted by Catholics as a bestowal of the Holy Spirit or by Protestants as a human profession of faith and ratification of the

baptismal covenant)? There is not one normative ritual pattern in scripture and tradition, so the question becomes what provides the most theological and ritual coherence for Wesleyan/Methodist Christians? The removal of a rite of confirmation suggests that Wesley was less interested in a single ritual event in which one received a bestowal of the Holy Spirit or made a one-time profession of faith. The burden of his ministry was to create thick communities of discipleship formation and to motivate and incentivize *continued participation* in the way of salvation through the means of grace in Spirit-filled community. American Methodism reintroduces the rite of confirmation in the 20th century for a host of reasons. The question for us is what do we do now? Do we end confirmation as we know it? Or do we seek to clarify the end, the goal, of confirmation, as we have it?

Chapter 1. The Confirmation Project

The Church is always worried about losing the next generation. We desire to make real Christians, but we are not entirely sure how to do that good work. The Institute of Youth Ministry at Princeton Theological Seminary has committed significant financial and intellectual resources to equipping the saints for the work of ministry with the next generation of American adolescents. In 2014, the Institute received a \$1.1 million grant from the Lilly Endowment Inc. to fund a research initiative that sought to learn the extent to which confirmation and equivalent practices¹ in five Protestant denominations in North America are effective for strengthening discipleship in youth.² The Confirmation Project was a three-year study of more than three thousand U.S. congregations.³ The research team of The Confirmation Project has done a great service to American Protestantism as a catalyst for an ecumenical conversation about the practice of confirmation. As a work of practical theology, the Project provides a landscape view of what is currently taking place in confirmation and related discipleship ministries in local churches.

¹ As the team began their research they began to recognize that the term confirmation has different understandings in different Protestant denominations. The team chose to use the term *confirmation and equivalent practices* to broaden the conversation. It allowed denominations and congregations to determine what fit into this category. Overall, the study understood confirmation and equivalent practices to be ministry that focuses on the faith intensification and integration of young people into the body of Christ.

² Richard R. Osmer and Katherine M. Douglass, Eds. *Cultivating Teen Faith: Insights from the Confirmation Project*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018). For a shorter introduction to the work interpreted by the Project's co-directors, see Katherine M. Douglass, Richard R. Osmer, and Terri Martinson Elton, "Emerging Trends in Confirmation and Equivalent Practices," in *Word & World* Volume 38, Number 1 Winter 2018.

³ The Confirmation Project, www.theconfirmationproject.com.

1.1 Background

The Confirmation Project grew out of a friendship between Richard Osmer and Friedrich Schweitzer. Schweitzer, professor of theology at Universität Tübingen, was a principal researcher on one of the largest sociological studies on Protestant youth and religion in Europe focused primarily on confirmation. The results from ten years of international research were published in 2015 in a book entitled *Youth, Religion, and Confirmation Work in Europe*.⁴ Conducted in two phases—2007/2008 and 2012/2013—the European team set out to undertake an empirical project, collecting extensive data from nine European countries concerning the work of confirmation and evaluating the effectiveness of confirmation practice in shaping the religious beliefs and attitudes of youth. The team organized the “International Network for Research and Development of Confirmation and Christian Youth Work.” The shape of the study allowed for comparative analysis across countries and denominations.⁵

The European study found that confirmation work is the largest educational program of most Protestant churches in Europe.⁶ In the European countries participating in the study, between 400,000-500,000 adolescents participate in a confirmation program per

⁴ Friedrich Schweitzer, Kati Neimelä, Thomas Schlag, Henrik Simojoki, Eds., *Youth, Religion, and Confirmation Work in Europe: The Second Study* (München: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2015).

⁵ Wesleyan/Methodists readers will take an interest in the team’s research of The Methodist Church in Germany (Evangelisch-methodistische Kirche) which joined the project in 2012. The small size of the Methodist Church in Germany, 53,000 members, afforded the researchers an opportunity to study every single confirmand in the entire church, 138 leaders and 1058 confirmands.

⁶ Schweitzer, 17.

year.⁷ “For many young people,” the research team noted, “confirmation time is crucial in determining their future attachment and relationship to religion, faith, religious identity, and the church, their life orientation, moral attitudes, and ethical reflection as well as their commitment to voluntary activities.”⁸ However, the practice of confirmation functioned very differently according to country. In some countries, like Finland, confirmation was something in which almost everyone participated (over 80% of youth). However, it did not result in high levels of congregational participation (only 2-3% of Finns attend church weekly.) In other countries, like Austria, only 10% of youth participate in confirmation however, those who do are much more likely to be regular members of congregations. This study also showed that confirmation gives youth the opportunity to volunteer in ways that are otherwise inaccessible to them.⁹

Richard Osmer, ordained Presbyterian minister and Professor of Mission and Evangelism at Princeton Seminary, and his colleagues at Princeton’s Institute for Youth Ministry saw an opportunity to do a comparable national study to gain a landscape perspective in the United States.¹⁰ The Confirmation Project research team began with a desire to understand the choices and decisions that youth were making with regard to their

⁷ Ibid., 14-28.

⁸ Ibid., 14.

⁹ Interview with Katherine Douglass on Oct 6, 2014, <http://www.confirmnotconform.com/blog/interview-confirmation-project>.

¹⁰ Richard R. Osmer, *Confirmation: Presbyterian Practices in Ecumenical Perspective* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1996). Osmer has long been interested in the topic of confirmation, catechism, and religious education. His book is one of the most helpful introductions to the historical and theological questions for Protestants in North America. The ecumenical scope of the work gives a breadth of understanding across traditions. By contrast, I am attempting rather to look at the distinctive issues that emerge uniquely within American Methodism.

faith in Christ and their participation in the local church. They worried about the “graduation affect” that confirmation can have on youth, where upon completion of the confirmation program youth discontinue their participation in the life of the congregation. The research team was interested in learning about why this “graduation affect” happens. Additionally, they wanted to seek out and learn from congregations who are successfully integrating youth into congregational life after confirmation.

The research team also wanted to resource practitioners. The team assumed a vast lack of understanding between leaders, youth, and parents with regard to what confirmation is supposed to be or to achieve. A summary from their website follows:

Today, it is not difficult to find a great deal of confusion and frustration about confirmation and equivalent practices (CEP) in Protestant congregations across the USA. Most denominations lack internally agreed upon theological and pedagogical approaches to CEP. Even less consensus exists across denomination lines about the theory and practice of CEP. It appears that the one widely shared belief about CEP within and across denominational lines is that traditional approaches to CEP are simply not working anymore. Yet, denominations, congregations, pastors, parents, and youth participants continue to place a high value on CEP and many young people who otherwise maintain marginal status with regard to participation in their congregations, show up in CEP programs. The time has come for a broad-based program of research and reflection about what will make CEP effective for the contemporary era.¹¹

The team was aware that some of the confusion is rooted in the complex and obscure history of confirmation, but their interest was focused on describing the state of the present landscape.

¹¹ The Confirmation Project, www.theconfirmationproject.com.

1.2 Aim, Objectives, Methodology

According to the Executive Summary, The Confirmation Project set out to understand confirmation and “equivalent practices” in five denominations with traditions of infant baptism with the goal of strengthening discipleship formation for youth. The five denominations include the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (USA), and the United Methodist Church. The project assembled a team of scholars and research assistants representing the five denominations whose confirmation practices would be studied. The primary objectives were:

1. To carry out empirical research on confirmation and equivalent practices across five denominations. A concurrent, mixed method approach will be used, including quantitative surveys and qualitative portraits.
2. To interpret and analyze findings that will strengthen youth discipleship within the church.
3. To disseminate the findings of this study through articles, monographs, webinars, conferences, and an interactive website.

The research team used a mixed-method approach of quantitative surveys and qualitative portraits to carry out empirical research to determine how confirmation contributes to faith intensification and integration of young people into the body of Christ. They surveyed more than three thousand congregations from five denominations.¹² The

¹² There were 6,777 total respondents: 3,569 were ministry leaders, 1,121 were parents, and 2,087 were youth. Looking at ministry leaders by denomination, 38 percent were UMC, 26 percent were ELCA, 18 percent were Episcopal, 14 percent were PC (USA), and 4 percent were AME. The survey was a population sample, where all congregations that had confirmation in the past two years could

survey included ministry leaders, parents, and youth to map the national understanding and practices of confirmation. Site visits of congregations, camps, and regional gatherings were used to capture the on-the-ground experience of confirmation. The research team used a qualitative method of inquiry called Portraiture to conduct site visits of twenty-four ministries of different congregational sizes and contexts. The on-the-ground experience of confirmation provided the character of vibrant confirmation ministries as members of the research team visited ministries around the country to observe, interview, and experience confirmation within the life of the church. It demonstrated the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience and organizational life.

The American study lacked some of the empirical rigor of the sociological study conducted by Schweitzer's European team.¹³ Douglas and Osmer write,

In order to inform the theological judgment of leaders of confirmation in congregations, we have attempted to construct knowledge that would help them imagine, implement, and evaluate a confirmation program in its entirety, as well as the various activities and events that are a part of this program. We also have attempted to expose leaders to new ways of thinking about confirmation—what kinds of activities might be included, for what age level it might be offered, how

take the survey, distributed via email to clergy contacts from each congregation. (Clergy then distributed to other ministry leaders, parents, and youth.) Surveys were collected over two school years, beginning in the fall of 2014 and ending in the summer of 2016. As a way of measuring confirmation's impact on young people, confirmands were invited to participate in a second survey six-plus months after the first. T2 had 416 of the 1,602 students (with emails) complete it, for a response rate of 26 percent.

¹³ The study that Princeton undertook was much different than the European project. The European project involved two studies, nine countries, 400,000+ confirmands, and language translation. The American study involved five denominations, 170,000+ confirmands, much denominational translation among differing conceptions of the work of confirmation.

long it might last, the participation of parents, and so forth. We did not develop theological norms for confirmation, if by this is meant a single theology or model of confirmation that claims to be applicable in all congregations...In short, our goal has been to construct theological knowledge that might inform the judgment of confirmation leaders.¹⁴

The result is a practical-theological research project with solid methodology, but also accessibility to practitioners in ministry “on the ground.” The research reinforces basic intuitions. For example, the team found that five dimensions of confirmation programs that are strengthening and forming the faith of youth today include, (a) teaching, (b) mentoring, (c) camping, (d) parenting, and (e) leadership.¹⁵ The portraits of excellent or innovative confirmation programs in a variety of denominations, congregations, and geographical regions expands the imagination and offers concrete examples for ministers as a resource to supplement or reform their practice.

1.3 Findings

Among churches that practice infant baptism, confirmation and equivalent practices share certain characteristics. They provide an opportunity for young people to encounter the gospel anew in ways that strengthen their understanding of the faith, deepen their experience of Christian community, and equip them to discern their calling to join in God’s mission to the world. Through confirmation, congregations bear witness to the reconciling and redemptive love of God and the covenant of grace into which all Christians are baptized.¹⁶

¹⁴ Osmer and Douglass, *Cultivating Teen Faith*, 155.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 149.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 141.

The research team has highlighted seven emerging trends in confirmation and equivalent practices.¹⁷ These trends are:

1. There is a high degree of agreement among leaders, youth, and parents that the purpose of confirmation is to strengthen young people's faith.
2. Parents, youth, and leaders expect confirmation to focus on the traditional contents of the Christian tradition, but to do so in ways that are engaging and participatory.
3. While confirmation still operates within a classroom paradigm, many programs include other activities that are significant to faith formation.
4. The creativity and passion of congregations and leaders is critical.
5. Confirmation is typically at the end of childhood and the beginning of adolescence.
6. Most young people in confirmation are already involved in their congregation.¹⁸

The Confirmation Project found that young people engaged in confirmation practices were more religiously interested and committed than the rank-and-file American teenager. They come away optimistic about the present and future practice. They believe that confirmation does seem to bring together adolescents in ways that make them stronger and more steadfast in their faith.

The team worried that perhaps their methodology led them to the results they wanted to find. The Confirmation Project was a national sample of young people, parents, and youth pastors, but not a random sample. They intentionally sought out vibrant

¹⁷ Douglass, Osmer, Elton, "Emerging Trends in Confirmation and Equivalent Practices," 31-32.

¹⁸ Osmer and Douglass, *Cultivating Teen Faith*, 149.

congregations and practices to highlight. It is also possible that in the United States, young people who go through confirmation may find their faith strengthened because they were already religious to begin with—or at least they had faithful parents who cared enough to sign them up for confirmation. There is a high correlation between parents and teenagers in terms of religiosity. The extent to which confirmation and equivalent practices correlate to a deeper faith remains unclear.

What is clear is that “confirmation fulfills its faith-forming potential most effectively when it is approached not as a program with requirements to tick off but as a process of formation that is connected in multiple ways to the broader congregation’s relationships, practices, traditions, and experiences.”¹⁹ The central finding of The Confirmation Project’s research, which the team emphasizes again and again in their interpretation of the research, is that confirmation and its equivalent practices are not an end in themselves. As a pedagogical approach, they are best understood “as part of an ecology, a collaboration of many systems—families, congregational relationships, educational curricula, worship, camps, and conferences—that are all focused toward one end: the formation of disciples.”²⁰ At best, confirmation as a discipleship formation practice is one just one of many factors that may contribute to deepening adolescent faith.

¹⁹ Ibid., 2.

²⁰ Ibid., 2.

Another finding that the research team emphasizes is that confirmation in American Protestantism is not a single thing. The team interprets the broad diversity not as the unfortunate result of ambiguity in historical and theological origin of the practice, but rather as a sign of the importance of contextualization. “Good confirmation programs, we have come to learn, are contextually adaptive and custom designed to fit their circumstances and people.”²¹ They assume that the lack of a single set of standards governing confirmation practice today allows for a contextually adaptive approach.²² Good confirmation practice requires wise pastoral leadership, discernment of context, and adaptability.

1.4 Findings for American Methodism

The study provides some interesting findings for the United Methodist Church.²³ The team looked at whether or not there is a typical duration of confirmation. Across the five denominations, the answer is no. However, there are trends. When separated by denomination, on the long end of the spectrum is the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), with forty-two percent of programs being eighteen to twenty-four months and thirty percent of programs being twenty-four to thirty-six months. The United Methodist Church (UMC) median is five months, with 90 percent lasting no longer than nine months and 42 percent less than three months. The other three denominations fall in the middle.

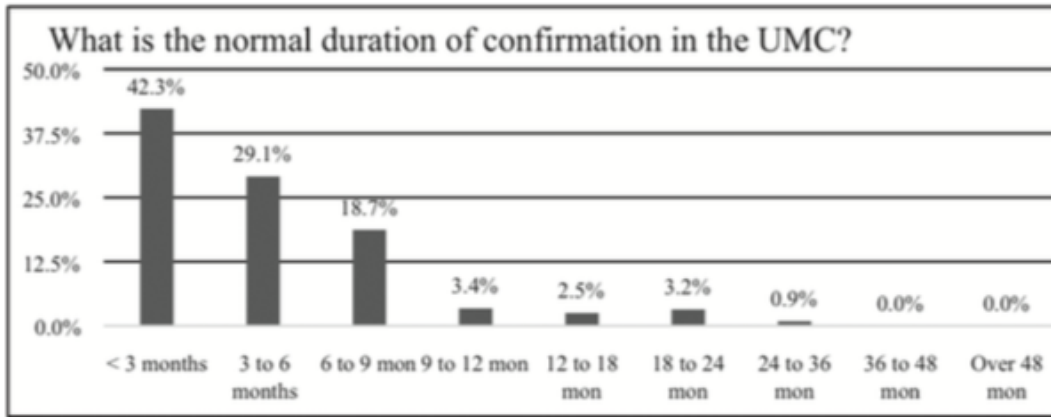
²¹ Ibid., 157.

²² Ibid., 148.

²³ Douglass, Osmer, Elton, “Emerging Trends in Confirmation and Equivalent Practices,” 23-26.

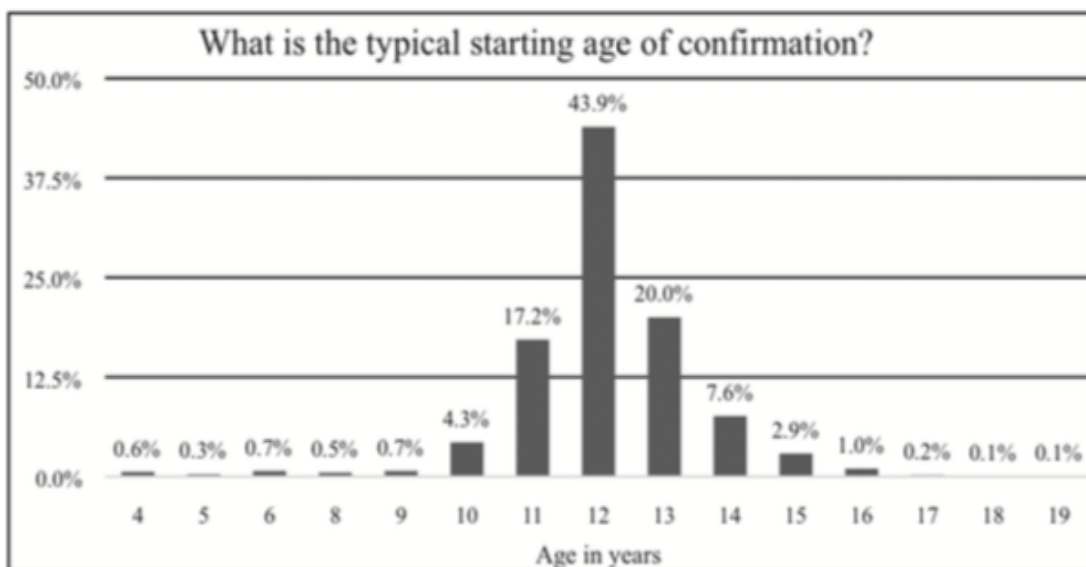
Figure 1: Normal Duration of Confirmation in the UMC

United Methodist Church (within the USA)



For the majority of congregations, confirmation takes place in early adolescence. Most confirmands begin around the age of eleven, twelve, or thirteen. Over ninety-one percent of congregations to offer confirmation beginning between the ages of eleven and thirteen and forty-four percent at age twelve.

Figure 2: Typical Starting Age of Confirmation



In the end, The Confirmation Project found that having a period of time designated as “confirmation” gives parents, ministry leaders, and youth the opportunity to intentionally go deeper in faith formation. Most confirmation ministries are aimed at faith intensification and integrating young people into the congregation in early adolescence. The research team observed that:

To intensify faith, leaders create an ecology of learning environments as a way of accompanying youth in internalizing the corporate beliefs of the faith community, and design ways to connect them into the body of Christ, the local congregation, and church at large. Confirmation is intentional about building relationships—in both formal and informal ways—and this learning process is marked by a public rite in which confirmands say yes to God, to their deeper understanding of faith, to being part of the church, and to living their faith in daily life.²⁴

For the first time you begin to see The Confirmation Project research team acknowledge that confirmation involves more than simply a pedagogy of discipleship formation. Historically, confirmation was a liturgical rite. Here they interpret that meaning of the rite as an opportunity to profess subjective faith and desire to be a part of the church.

1.5 Conclusion

The Confirmation Project has catalyzed a broad conversation in American Protestantism about the practice of confirmation and provided the church with a broad picture of what is taking place in confirmation today. Additionally, it has provided in-depth portraits of multiple vibrant congregations who practice confirmation well in ways that strengthen the faith of their adolescents. However, the approach has its limitations. The

²⁴ Ibid., 39.

team takes for granted that confirmation is a program of religious education, “a time-honored rite of passage for teenagers.”²⁵ They assume that the work of confirmation is to create “learning environments rich in opportunities to encounter the holy, ponder the favor God greets us with, and choose to profess, or not, our willingness to place ourselves at God’s disposal.”²⁶

These assumptions are perfectly understandable for a project that emerged from the Institute of Youth Ministry that desires to equip practitioners to do the work of discipleship formation. However, the methodology creates two problems. First, it obscures some very important historical and theological questions that could be quite helpful to practitioners as they seek to adapt confirmation programs in innovative ways to meet contextual needs. Second and more problematic, the research team uses the term “confirmation” to conflate a program of religious education with a liturgical rite.

My intention is to take a more historical view from within a particular tribe—Wesleyan/Methodist. I want to understand the distinctive problems and possibilities emerging from our history that inform engagement in the broader Protestant conversation about rites of Christian initiation and discipleship formation of children/youth. Instead of taking a broad ecumenical view, I want to take a narrow view from within this single tribe. But, before delving into history, it will be helpful to gain a slightly larger view of the current

²⁵ Osmer and Douglass, *Cultivating Teen Faith*, vii.

²⁶ *Ibid*, x.

landscape by turning briefly to the important sociological work by Christian Smith and his team on youth and religion in American life.

Chapter 2. The National Study of Youth and Religion

The Confirmation Project is situated within a broader conversation about the spiritual and religious lives of American teenagers spurred on not least by William R. Kennan, Jr. Professor of Sociology at University of Notre Dame, Dr. Christian Smith. In 2000, Christian Smith and Lisa Pearce, Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, set out to conduct the most extensive sociological research project on youth and religion ever undertaken.

Generously supported by Lilly Endowment Inc., The National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), began in August 2001 and continued through December 2015. It was an attempt “to describe and evaluate the shape and texture of American religion broadly by viewing it through the lens of the religious and spiritual practices of religious and nonreligious American youth.”²⁷

Smith and his team wanted to identify effective practices in the religious, moral, and social formation of the lives of youth; to describe the extent and perceived effectiveness of the programs and opportunities that religious communities are offering to their youth; and to foster an informed national discussion about the influence of religion in youth's lives, in order to encourage sustained reflection about and rethinking of our cultural and institutional practices with regard to youth and religion.²⁸ The work emphasizes the interplay of broad cultural influences, family socialization, and religious motivations in forming the spiritual and

²⁷ Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 6.

²⁸ <https://youthandreligion.nd.edu/research-purpose/>.

life experiences and outcomes of American youth. The primary research findings were analyzed in a book by the lead researcher Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist entitled, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, and a follow up book by Christian Smith with Patricia Snell entitled *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*.²⁹ Smith's more recent work on the religious and spiritual lives of U.S. adolescents emphasizes the interplay of broad cultural influences, family socialization, and religious motivations in forming the spiritual and life experiences and outcomes of American youth.

2.1 Methods

Good sociological research is immensely beneficial in descriptively mapping the social world in which we live and move and have our being. It allows us to get a view beyond our immediate field of vision in order to build a general framework of knowledge about the proportions and distributions of the matter in question.³⁰ One must keep in mind that sociologists specialize in generalizations. Their ability to describe individual religious preferences with a degree of specificity is limited. While sociology's descriptive power extends only as far as the range of its data-sets, it can describe the recent past with some

²⁹ Christian Smith with Patricia Snell. *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). Christian Smith, with Melinda Lundquist Denton. 2005. This lecture, "Soul Searching: Understanding The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers Findings from the National Study of Youth and Religion. The Marjorie Pay Hinckley Lecture, BYU, February 2008" is an excellent overview of the NSYR research.

³⁰ Smith, *Soul Searching*, 30-31.

degree of precision. Its insights can be extremely valuable for practitioners and theorists alike.

Smith and the research team aimed to provide a first ever, detailed, baseline, nationally-representative, descriptive mapping of the religious and spiritual practices, beliefs, experiences, histories, concerns, and involvements of American youth.³¹ The project had two sources of data collection. First, the team conducted a national, random-digit-dial telephone survey of U.S. households containing at least one teenager age 13-17, surveying one household parent for about thirty minutes and one randomly selected household teen for about fifty minutes. In total, the team interviewed 3,400 youth and one parent of each youth. Second, a team of seventeen trained project researchers conducted 267 in-depth, face-to-face interviews with a subsample of telephone survey respondents in forty-five states. These interviews were sampled to capture a broad range of difference among U.S. teens in religion, age, race, sex, socioeconomic status, rural-suburban-urban residence, region of the country and language spoken (English and Spanish).

2.2 Key Research Findings

Lots of Variance

The religious and spiritual lives of U.S. teenagers are complicated (page 7). There is a lot of variance in levels of teen religiosity in the United States. About one-third are regularly religiously involved, about one-third are sporadically religiously involved, and about one-third are not religiously involved. There is a huge spectrum. The intensity of teen religiosity

³¹ An in-depth description of methodology can be found in *Soul Searching*, 6-7.

varies most not by gender, ethnicity or race. Rather, religious tradition resulted in the greatest variance. According to the data, teenage religiosity can be described in the following order from most to least religious: Latter-Day Saints, White Conservative Protestants, Black Protestants, Mainline Protestants, Catholic, Jewish. The least religious were non-religious. Of course, a sociologist does not have access to the true spiritual conditions of adolescent hearts and souls. They are able to track measurable data—things like church attendance, understandings of God, reported importance of faith, religious practices such as prayer. To illustrate the huge variance, just take one example—religious service attendance once a week+: Latter-Day Saints 71%, White Conservative Protestants 55%, Black Protestants 41%, Mainline Protestants 44%, Catholic 40%, Jewish 8%, Non-religious 0%.³² The team researched many different variables across multiple dimensions: religious and spiritual feelings, beliefs, and experiences. Each variable showed a different outcome, but looking only at religious service attendance, one can appreciate the huge variance among teenagers.

More Conventional Than Rebellious

The team found that, contrary to dominate stereotypes, cultural images, and parental anecdotes, most U.S. teens are not religious rebels alienated from or disgruntled with the churches in which they are being raised. Smith wrote,

Decades of psychological theorizing about adolescents in the twentieth century, based primarily on the observation of adolescent psychological patients, not coincidentally, portrayed the teenage years as inevitably rocked by “storm and stress.” For decades, experts taught that adolescence is a time of radical identity change, emotional upheaval, and relational conflict. By the late 1960s and early

³² *Soul Searching*, 37-39.

1970s the youth and adults of an entire era came to understand themselves as caught in a crisis of a “generation gap”...but that impression is fundamentally wrong. What we learned by interviewing hundreds of teenagers all around the country is that the vast majority of American teenagers are *exceedingly conventional* in religious identity and practices.³³

The vast majority of U.S. teenagers seem content to follow the faith of their families with little questioning. American adolescents are more conventional than the team assumed.

Benignly Positive View of Religion

“The vast majority of U.S. teenagers are simply not only not hostile to or rebellious against religion generally or the faith tradition of their parents specifically.”³⁴ Religion is not a particularly contested or conflictive aspect of the lives of teenagers. Most American teenagers, even non-religious ones, had benignly positive view of religion. It gives people a moral foundation. One 15-year old nonreligious white girl from Washington said, “Religion gives people something to believe in, something to hold on to. Not everybody needs it, but for people who do, it gives them something to believe in.”³⁵ Otherwise most teenagers do not give it much thought. Religion is in the background; it is not something that they necessarily practice. It does not necessarily impact their day-to-day lives in ways that they describe.³⁶ It just does not seem to matter that much.

³³ *Soul Searching*, 119-120.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 122.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 125.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 122.

Spiritual but not Religious?

According to the research team, the alleged widespread phenomena of “spiritual seeking” and “spiritual-but-not-religious” identities among high school teens is bogus.³⁷ Serious spiritual seekers make up only two percent of U.S. teenagers ages 13-17. The majority of American youth believe it is okay for others to be eclectic seekers, but they themselves are not interested.

Profoundly Individualistic

“American youth, like American adults, are,” writes Smith, “nearly without exception profoundly individualistic, instinctively presuming autonomous, individual self-direction to be a universal human norm and life goal. Thoroughgoing individualism is not a contested orthodoxy for teenagers. It is an invisible and pervasive ‘doxa,’ that is, an unrecognized, unquestioned, invisible premise or presupposition.”³⁸ “Who am I to judge?” they ask foregoing traditional religious languages of accountability, commitment, and duty. “There is no right answer,” they proclaim without engaging the great philosophical, religious, or wisdom traditions of the East or West. They have little use for communal vocabularies of faithfulness, obedience, calling, or obligation. They have few ties to the past.

For American adolescents, it is OK to be somewhat religious, but it is not OK to be “too religious.” You don’t do that. You don’t go there. You do not want to be labeled “too religious.” Too religious is weird and wrong. If you want to be religious that is fine, but

³⁷ Ibid, 135.

³⁸ Ibid, 143.

it should not be a big deal. There is a vast cultural pressure youth face. And becoming “too religious” is not acceptable.

A Later Script

“Most American youth bring strong life-course assumptions and scripts to religion (and risk behaviors), viewing its relevance in terms of ‘age appropriate’ stages.”³⁹ We organize our lives sociologically at different stages of life. At different stages of life, different things are assumed to be acceptable. In the script that most teenagers assume, religious devotion is not something that fits in. They are not against anyone who wants to participate in religion, but it is really not part of their main script.

Instrumental View of Religion⁴⁰

American youth (like adults) tend to assume an instrumental view of religion, instinctively supposing that religion exists to help individuals be and do what they want. Religion is generally not viewed as an external, transcendent authority that makes compelling claims/demands on their lives, especially to change or grow in ways they may not want to. Individual desire drives it, rather than being formed by it. “For most American youth, religion bears a close but ambivalent relationship with morality—religion is thought of as fostering morality, but is also not necessary for morality.”

³⁹ BYU Lecture.

⁴⁰ *Soul Searching*, 147-154.

Inarticulate about Faith

Teenagers lack a theological language with which to express their faith or interpret their experience of the world. The vast majority of American youth are unable to speak intelligibly about their faith, their religious beliefs and practices, and its meaning or place in their lives. “For many teens we interviewed,” writes Smith, “it seemed as if ours was the first time any adult had ever asked them what they believe (by contrast, clear articulation about other subjects they’ve been drilled on—drunk driving, STDs, tolerance, etc.).”⁴¹

Formation is Structurally Marginalized

The religious formation of youth occurs against the backdrop of so many other things. “In the ecology of American adolescents’ lives,” Smith argues,

religious faith operates in a social-structurally weak position, competing for time, energy, and attention and often losing against other more dominant demands and commitments—particularly school, sports, romance, television, and other media. If you conceptualize people’s lives as a bundle of time, energy, and attention. And if you consider a society an assortment of activities and institutions that make claims on people’s time, energy, and attention how much does school get to have? If you conceive of life as a table, religion sits on a little tiny stool in the corner. I know it is different in others lives. Most teenagers at the center of the curve. The social structure of people’s lives crowd out religion. It structurally marginalized.⁴²

Smith and his team describe a landscape that is more challenging for the work of religious formation because of the way the lives of American adolescence are organized socially.

⁴¹ Ibid., 131.

⁴² BYU Lecture.

“Moralistic Therapeutic Deists”

On the basis of all their research, the team asserted a tentative thesis about the de facto, functional religious orientation of the majority of American teens. Most U.S. teenagers are not Protestant or Catholic, Lutheran or Presbyterian or Wesleyan; rather, they are functional, de facto “Moralistic Therapeutic Deists.”⁴³ The creed of this religion, as codified from what emerged from the research, sounds something like this:

1. A god exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal in life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in my life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.

Smith and his team argue that Moral Therapeutic Deism (MTD) poses a huge threat to any project of faith formation. “It has colonized and is colonizing many historical religious traditions,” Smith argues. “Almost without anyone noticing, MTD seems to have converted or is converting believers in old faiths to its alternative religious vision of divinely underwritten personal happiness and interpersonal niceness. The goal of religious devotion is not costly discipleship, self-sacrifice, or giving your life to God.”⁴⁴

⁴³ *Soul Searching*, 162-170.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 171.

Positive Life Outcomes for Religious Teens⁴⁵

Smith and his research team reveal a number of challenges to those committed to the formation of youth. However, they did find that religious commitment is positively correlated with health and flourishing for youth. Religious commitment makes a clear, significant difference across all standard measurable outcomes in teens' lives—it clearly differentiates the quality of teens' lives, even if teens can't see that.

Other Pertinent Findings

Most U.S. teenagers mirror their parents' religious faith. A minority of American teenagers—but a significant minority—say religious faith is important, and that it makes a difference in their lives. These teenagers are doing better in life on a number of scales, compared to their less religious peers.

2.3 Conclusion

The National Study on Youth and Religion has shaped the contours of the conversation in America about the religious and spiritual lives of teenagers. The Confirmation Project has renewed the interest among Protestants in North America about the role of confirmation in the formation of youth. Kenda Creasy Dean, a researcher on both the National Study on Youth and Religion and The Confirmation Project, has written in multiple places about this: “The God portrayed in both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures asks, not just for commitment, but for our very lives. The God of the Bible traffics in life and death, not niceness, and calls for sacrificial love, not benign whatever-

⁴⁵ Ibid., 235.

ism.” Kenda Creasy Dean writes, “American young people are, theoretically, fine with religious faith—but it does not concern them very much, and it is not durable enough to survive long after they graduate from high school. One more thing: we’re responsible.”⁴⁶

Sociology and practical theology are important sources for understanding the present realities, challenges, and possibilities for the work of formation among youth. However, I am convinced that faithful work requires a greater awareness of the resources and the constraints of our history and our theological inheritance. Now, its time to look to the past.

⁴⁶ Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3.

Chapter Three. Development of Confirmation in the West

Our current discussions of pastoral praxis,
of theological meaning, or spirituality, and of much more
rest finally on the assumption that *we know what we are talking about*;
and to know what we are talking about demands knowing much more
than can be generated by a mere creativity operating upon data
drawn only from the experience of itself.¹

- Thomas Talley

Faithful pastoral practice requires more than an awareness of the current challenges and best practices of the present moment; it demands, as well, a historical and theological perspective. The National Study of Youth and Religion offers a broad view of the present landscape of the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents in North America. The Confirmation Project has catalyzed a new conversation among scholars and ministers around best practices in the work of confirmation in the local church. Engaging in these conversations is vital for American Methodism. However, we must do so with an awareness of the distinctive theological resources and particular historical movements that have shaped the way in which our tribe faces the challenge of forming the next generation in the faith. There are unique challenges and possibilities for those doing the work of confirmation in American Methodism.

As I mentioned in the introduction, American Methodism began without a rite of confirmation. From 1784 until 1964 no liturgical rite of confirmation existed in American Methodism. John Wesley did not include the rite of confirmation in *The Sunday Service of the*

¹ Cited in Maxwell Johnson's *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation* (Collegeville, MN: Pueblo Press, 2007), xx.

Methodists in North America: With Other Occasional Services published on September 10, 1784. Wesley provided the *Sunday Service* for the purpose of shaping the liturgical life of the Methodist movement in America. A rite of confirmation was reintroduced into American Methodism in the 1965 *Book of Worship for Church and Home*. Why did Wesley remove the rite? What were the consequences for American Methodism? Why was it reintroduced? How should we approach confirmation now? These are the questions which will guide our inquiry in this and subsequent chapters.

In order to understand the possible reasons why Wesley may have removed the rite of confirmation, it is important to have a cursory grasp the evolution of the rites of Christian initiation in the Western Church. Christian initiation refers to the formal ritual process by which new Christian converts were integrated into the life of the Church. A comprehensive history of the development of Christian initiation in the West is beyond the scope of this thesis. There are several excellent books detailing this history.² Here I will simply trace the basic contours of the development of Christian initiation focusing on the development of the rite of confirmation in particular. The consensus among liturgical scholars is that confirmation has been a rite in search of a theological meaning and interpretation.

² Gerard Austin, *The Rite of Confirmation: Anointings with the Spirit*. (Collegeville, A Pueblo Book from Liturgical Press, 1985, 2004). Aidan Kavanagh, *Confirmation: Origins and Reform* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1988). Maxwell Johnson *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Evolution and Interpretation*. (Collegeville, MN: Pueblo Press, 2007). Richard Robert Osmer, *Confirmation: Presbyterian Practices in Ecumenical Perspective* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1996), 98-101.

3.1 New Testament

Maxwell Johnson's *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation* is the best starting point for a thorough study of the topic. Johnson begins by looking at the New Testament origins of the rites of Christian initiation. "What will become clear," he writes, "is that there is not—even within the New Testament itself—one ritual pattern for the initiation of Christian converts that might be regarded as universally 'normative.' Rather, from its very origins Christian liturgical practice reflects considerable variety and multiformity both in its ritual patterns and in its differing theological interpretations."³

Johnson illustrates this point by emphasizing that, while Jesus was baptized and instructed his disciples to baptize, the way in which Jesus himself tended to initiate or incorporate people into special relationship with himself was through "table companionship." Jesus ate people, with sinners and tax collectors. He ate with disciples and dissenters. Johnson writes,

Nothing, not even baptism, and certainly nothing like confirmation, was required as preparatory step. Entrance to the meal of God's reign, anticipated and incarnated in the very life, ministry, and meals of Jesus of Nazareth was granted by Jesus himself and granted especially to those who were not prepared and not (yet) converted, to the godless and undeserving, to the impure, and the unworthy. Conversion itself, it appears, was not a pre-requisite for but a consequence of this encounter with Jesus at table...Initiation into Christ and the church—at whatever age and at whatever level of preparation and understanding—is nothing other than initiation into Jesus' table companionship.⁴

Whatever can be said about the practice of the historical Jesus, Johnson notes that rites called either *baptisma* (baptism, immersion, dipping) or *loutron* (bath or washing) came

³ Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation*, 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

almost immediately to serve as the means of initiation into the post-resurrection community of Jesus.⁵

As early as the first post-resurrection Pentecost, Luke describes the following baptismal event:

Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.” So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added (Acts 2:38-41).

Luke’s description of the mass baptism of Pentecost parallels closely the “baptism of repentance” proclaimed and administered by John the Baptizer at the Jordan River, a baptism, according to the witness of multiple gospels, which was experienced by Jesus of Nazareth himself.⁶ The gospel writers are sensitive to the potential embarrassment for the early Church. “I need to be baptized by you,” the Baptizer says to Jesus, “and do you come to me?” (Matthew 3.14). The gospel writers want to make the superiority of Jesus the Christ to John the Baptizer clear. John says, “I baptized with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Matthew 3.11). This is the first indication that there might be a distinction, perhaps even an antithesis, between water baptism and baptism by the Holy Spirit. While charismatic traditions will later exploit the ambiguity, it has governed the interpretation of Christian initiation through history. Rather, the baptism of Jesus by

⁵ Ibid., 7.

⁶ Ibid., 7.

John serves as the paradigmatic moment. “And when Jesus was baptized, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and alighting on him; and lo, a voice from heaven, saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased”” (Matthew 3.16-17). Quickly, the use of such a baptismal or washing ritual as a means of incorporating converts into the Christian communities became the dominant tradition for the earliest churches. In the baptism of Jesus, there is both a water-washing and the imparting of the Holy Spirit. How does one become a Christian? *By water and Spirit.*

Other biblical images speak about initiation by water and Spirit. The early church remembered the dialogue of Jesus with Nicodemus in which Jesus describes something akin to a second birth: “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit” (John 3.5). The apostle Paul also associated the gift of the Holy Spirit and baptism: “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12.12). The evidence from the rest of the Acts of the Apostles suggests a bit more complexity or, perhaps, diversity of practice. The elements of initiation seem clear—proclamation of the gospel, conversion, the gift of the Holy Spirit, baptism by water washing. What remains unclear is the dominant sequence of initiation.

One difficult but very important text for the development and future interpretation of confirmation is Acts 8. While in Samaria, Philip was proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ. Both men and women believed Philip and were baptized, but the gift of the Holy Spirit did not accompany their baptism:

Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit (Acts 8.14-17).

The story suggests that there was a delay between proclamation, belief, water washing, and the reception of the Holy Spirit by laying on of hands. A similar pattern can be seen in Acts 19.1-7. Twelve disciples in Ephesus had not received (or even heard of) the Holy Spirit, but had been baptized only with John the Baptizer's "baptism of repentance." In response to Paul, they are baptized "in the name of the Lord Jesus." Then, through the laying on of Paul's hands, they too receive the Holy Spirit.⁷ As rites of Christian initiation develop, Acts 8 and 19 will become central to arguments for post-baptismal rites of hand laying and consignation explicitly connected with the ministry of bishops. It provided a theological justification by appeals to apostolic precedent.⁸

Sometimes in the Acts of the Apostles the Spirit is given after the water-bath; but other times the Spirit comes before the water. In Acts 10:44-48, the Holy Spirit comes upon Gentiles in Caesarea during one of Peter's sermons *before* they are baptized. It is this pre-baptismal gift of the Holy Spirit that serves as the basis for their subsequent and immediate baptism. Something similar is described regarding the initiation of Paul in Acts 9. During his encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road, Paul goes blind. Through the laying on of Ananias's hands, Paul's sight is not only restored but the Holy Spirit comes upon him (Acts 9.17). After receiving the Holy Spirit, Paul is baptized (Acts 9.18).

⁷ Ibid., 29-30.

⁸ Ibid., 91.

A most difficult question emerges for those seeking ritual clarity and coherence: Is the Holy Spirit given at, before, or after baptism? On the basis of these few baptismal events described in Acts, the most we can assume is that, for the earliest Christians, baptism and the Holy Spirit are bound together inseparably.⁹ Whether the Holy Spirit comes before, during, or after baptism, the point is that baptism and the Holy Spirit are seen as closely unified.

There are many questions we would like to know about the origin of rites of initiation. We are not certain how the earliest Christian baptisms were administered or what words were used in the conferring of baptism. Neither do we know for sure whether infants were baptized. Because the question will play into later discussions about rites of initiation in American Methodism, this warrants a bit more discussion. On historical evidence alone, Kurt Aland has argued “infant baptism is certainly provable only from the third century.”¹⁰ The earliest irrefutable historical evidence is in early third-century passages of Tertullian, who deplores the baptism of “little children,” and in a contemporary passage of *The Apostolic Tradition*, which speaks of baptizing the “little children” first—some of whom apparently cannot yet “speak for themselves.”¹¹ There is no proof either way of the apostolic origins of the practice. By the fifth century, infant baptism was widespread. Ever since, most Christians have practiced the baptism of infants.

⁹ Ibid., 32.

¹⁰ Kurt Aland, *Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 10.

¹¹ Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation*, 89.

Nevertheless, within the New Testament period itself the primary candidate for Christian initiation would have been an adult.¹² Based primarily on descriptions of baptism from Acts, Aidan Kavanagh summarizes the general pattern of the Christian initiation of adults in the New Testament as following a four-step process:

First...the proclamation of the gospel...always precedes baptism...Second, the normal response of those who hear the gospel proclaimed is expected to be conversion to faith in the exalted Lord...Third, the gospel proclaimed and believed usually results in the water baptism...(that is,) what apostolic proclamation, conversion, and baptism in water and Spirit—the whole initiatory process—resulted in was life in a Spirit-filled community living by apostolic teaching, in unity with apostolic witnesses of the risen Lord who is exalted and now become life-giving Spirit for his people, through eucharistic prayer at home and petitionary prayer in the synagogue. The regular post baptismal events at this period are not a series of specific liturgical “completions” of an only partial water rite, but full and robust engagement in the Church itself: a whole new ethic and way of life...Here is the common ground that serves as articulation point for all the multivalent practices that enter the initiatory continuum.¹³

This is a very helpful sketch. However, one should be cautious in taking this sketch to be the normative pattern of Christian initiation in the New Testament period. Kavanagh only engages one source of evidence here, the Acts of the Apostles. The New Testament leaves us with as many questions as answers.¹⁴ “Whatever the particular rites employed in the Christian initiation of new converts in the primitive communities may have been,” Johnson writes, “it is clear from the New Testament that the meaning of initiation itself was understood in a variety of different ways.”¹⁵ Johnson highlights the variety of biblical images available for theological interpretation: forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit

¹² Ibid., 36.

¹³ Aidan Kavanagh, *The Shape of Baptism*, 20-23.

¹⁴ Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation*, 37.

¹⁵ Ibid., 37.

(Acts 2.38); new birth through water and the Holy Spirit (John 3.5; Titus 3.5-7); putting off of the old self and putting on the new, that is, being clothed in the righteousness of Christ (Galatians 3.27; Colossians 3.9-10); initiation into the one body of the Christian community (1 Corinthians 12.13; see also Acts 2.42); washing, sanctification, and justification in Christ and the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6.11); enlightenment (Hebrews 6.4; 10.32; 1 Peter 2.9); being anointed and/or sealed by the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 1.21-22; 1 John 2.20, 27); being sealed or marked as belonging to God and God's people (2 Corinthians 1.21-22; Ephesians 1.13-14; 4.30; Revelation 7.3); and, of course, being joined to Christ through participation in his death, burial, and resurrection (Romans 6.3-11; Colossians 2.12-15).¹⁶

This rich variety of theological interpretation sowed the seeds for diversity of expression and potential misunderstanding. “Especially in the Acts of the Apostles,” Gerard Austin writes, “we find a multiplicity of patterns, so many that no one should argue that New Testament evidence sets up this or that pattern as *the* model. In this vein it could be said that the diversity in baptismal practice among the churches today reflects the diversity of New Testament testimony.”¹⁷ Eventually two biblical images come to govern theological interpretation of Christian baptism—“new birth” or the “washing of regeneration” in water and the Holy Spirit (John 3:5 and Titus 3:5) in early Syria and Egypt and baptism as participation in the death and burial of Christ (Rom. 6) in North Africa and other places in the West—but not before a truly breathtaking period of liturgical innovation.

¹⁶ Ibid., 37.

¹⁷ Austin, *The Rite of Confirmation*, 6-7.

3.2 Early Church

The rites of Christian initiation which develop across Christendom make use of the rich theological resources found in the New Testament and meet the demands of pastoral practice in local contexts. The result is rich variety of liturgical practice in the first three centuries. E.C. Whitaker's 1960 *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy*, updated and expanded in 2003 by Maxwell Johnson, is the classic text in English for the primary source study of the rites of Christian initiation.¹ It offers the widest possible lens by which to see the diversity of initiatory practices across Syria, Syro-Palestine, Antioch, Assyria, Armenia, Byzantium, Egypt, Africa, Spain, Milan, Rome, Gallicia, and Britain. It also helps one to see more clearly how the development of confirmation emerges within a particular tradition. It is bound up with the Western church and particularly the initiatory rites that develop in and are promulgated from Rome. A rite called confirmation doesn't emerge until the sixth century; but there are important precursors, especially to what will become Protestant forms of confirmation, that develop starting with The Didache.

The Didache

Unknown to modern Christians until its discovery in 1873, the Didache, or "The Teaching of the Lord to the Gentiles through the Apostles," dates from either the late first or early second century in Syria.² Compiled originally in Greek, and based on a number of different sources, this document, the first of its kind, is a manual or "church order" of

¹ E.C. Whitaker, *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1960) Updated and Expanded by Maxwell Johnson (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2003).

² Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation*, 43.

sixteen chapters designed to offer directions for the worship and life of an early Christian congregation. The earliest description of the rites of Christian initiation we have beyond those given in the New Testament itself can be found in Chapter 7:

7.1 Regarding baptism. Baptize as follows: after first explaining all these points...“baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19), in running water. 2. But if you have no running water, baptize in other water; and if you cannot in cold, then in warm. 3. But if you have neither, pour water on the head three times “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” 4. Before the baptism, let the baptizer and the candidate for baptism fast, as well as any as are able. Require the candidate to fast one or two days previously.³

This brief description of the rite of baptism is preceded by six chapters containing teaching called “The Two Ways” (of death and life) consisting of instruction on the moral life of Christians. Based on the Decalogue (the Ten Commandments) and on Jesus’ sayings from the Sermon on the Mount and other gospel passages, “The Two Ways” instruction seems to function in The Didache as pre-baptismal catechesis for adult converts to Christianity.⁴ Presumably, this instruction supplies “all the points” to which Didache 7 refers which must be explained before baptism. Similarly, chapter 9 of the Didache makes it clear that baptism is a necessary pre-requisite for participation in the Eucharist: 9.5 Let no one eat

³ Whitaker, *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy*, 2.

⁴ For a history of the catechumenate in early Christianity see: Alan Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom*, Christian Mission and Modern Culture (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999); Alan Kreider, *Worship and Evangelism in Pre-Christendom*, Joint Liturgical Studies 32 (Cambridge: Grove Books, Ltd. 1995); Paul Turner, *The Hallelujah Highway: A History of the Catechumenate* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2000); Michel Dujarier, *A History of the Catechumenate* (New York: Sadlier, 1979).

or drink of your thanksgiving (meal) save those who have been baptized in the name of the Lord, since the Lord has said concerning this: “Do not give what is holy to dogs.”⁵

Johnson notes that what emerges from this early document is a developing ritual pattern or process of Christian initiation consisting of various stages and/or steps:

1. a period of prebaptismal catechesis, the duration of which the *Didache* does not indicate;
2. an immediate preparation for the rites themselves consisting of a one- or two-day fast on the part of the minister, the candidate(s), and, ideally, the whole community;
3. the celebration of the rite of baptism itself, preferably by means of either submersion or immersion; which may be accompanied by the trinitarian formula, though it is unclear here if an actual “formula” is intended; and
4. ongoing participation in the Eucharist, though it is not clear from the document if “first communion” functioned as the culmination of the baptismal rite itself.⁶

As such, this four-fold ritual pattern corresponds in broad outline to the regular sequence for adult initiation in the New Testament period described by Aidan Kavanagh. That is, the proclamation of the gospel leads to some kind of response of faith and conversion which in turn leads also to the rite of baptism and, following baptism, to an ongoing life of faith within the community. Here we see baptism as the pre-requisite for ongoing participation in the Eucharist.

⁵ Whitaker, *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy*, 2.

⁶ Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation*, 45.

Tertullian's De Baptismo

Some of the earliest post-biblical Christian documents, such as Tertullian's *De Baptismo* (c. 200) describe baptism as an event involving a water-washing and an anointing/laying on of hands. The gift of the Holy Spirit is attributed to the laying on of hands. "Not that the Holy Spirit is given to us in the water," Tertullian writes, "but that in the water we are made clean by the action of the angel, and made ready for the Holy Spirit."⁷ Questions about how the Holy Spirit is operative in Christian initiation in general and in baptism in particular continue to concern the early church.

Apostolic Tradition of Saint Hippolytus (ca. 215)⁸

The *Apostolic Tradition of Saint Hippolytus* offers extensive detail about the practices of Christian initiation. It describes a long and rigorous catechumenate, a period of extended instruction and preparation, which preceded baptism. The climax of initiation in the *Apostolic Tradition* occurs on Easter morning after an all-night vigil, a liturgical placement which emphasizes baptism as participation in the death and burial of Christ (Rom. 6). At cockcrow, prayer is made over the water; the candidates undress; the bishop prepares the oils of exorcism and thanksgiving. After the renunciation of Satan, each candidate is anointed thoroughly with oil of exorcism, goes down into the water, and is asked three questions, which are basically the Apostles' Creed. Each time, after affirming belief in each person of the Trinity, the candidate is washed with water. After the third washing, he or she comes up

⁷ Austin, *The Rite of Confirmation*, 11.

⁸ Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation*, 96-110.

out of the water and is anointed with the oil of thanksgiving by the presbyter who says, “I anoint you with holy oil in the name of Jesus Christ.” After drying themselves off and putting on their clothes, they enter the church to receive in a second post-baptismal action administered by the bishop involving the laying on of hands, an anointing (a pouring of holy oil), and a signing of the cross on the forehead (sealing). The instruction reads:

And the bishop shall lay his hand upon them invoking and saying: “O Lord God, who didst count these worthy of deserving the forgiveness of sins by the laver of regeneration, make them worthy to be filled with thy Holy Spirit and send upon them thy grace, that they may serve thee according to thy will; to thee is the glory, to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost in the holy Church, both now and ever and world without end. Amen.” After this pouring the consecrated oil and laying his hand on his head, he shall say, “I anoint thee with holy oil in God the Father Almighty and Christ Jesus and the Holy Ghost.” And sealing him on the forehead, he shall give him the kiss of peace.⁹

Thus, the new Christians now join the congregation for the first time in prayer, the kiss of peace, and the eucharist. The references to those who cannot speak for themselves in chapter 20 would seem to indicate that infants are among the candidates for Christian initiation in this community.¹⁰

Johnson notes that the pattern of Christian initiation described in the *Apostolic Tradition* presents “a ritual shape and general content highly consistent with what is known of Western liturgical practice elsewhere in the early-to-mid third century.”¹¹ It differs most obviously from North African rites in the specific contents of the post-baptismal hand-laying prayer by the bishop and an additional anointing at the end of his prayer. And yet, the

⁹ Austin, *The Rite of Confirmation*, 11.

¹⁰ Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation*, 101.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 101.

post-baptismal ritual structure of an anointing by the presbyter, a prayer with imposition of hands by the bishop, and a second anointing by the bishop with consignation is the pattern of the post-baptismal rites as they will develop in Rome. This pattern will become very important because it will influence the Roman rites that will become normative throughout the Latin West.¹²

As we have said, the norm in the early church was a rich variety of liturgical practice in the first three centuries which meet the demands of pastoral practice in local contexts. Eventually, the authority and influence of the Church at Rome grew. “The entire history of confirmation in the West,” writes Austin, “is bound up with the periodic insistence by Rome that an indigenous pattern of initiation be replaced by this Roman model.”¹³ There are a number of factors in the West that will contribute to the development of confirmation and to its eventual separation from baptism, but this one is quite important.¹⁴

Cyprian

Another significant witness to the theology of Christian initiation in the early church was Cyprian, bishop of Carthage. Cyprian was an influential leader of North African Christianity from 248 through both the Decian and Valerian persecutions until his

¹² The dating of Apostolic Tradition has been challenged in contemporary scholarship. For a more thorough look at this document see the *Hermeneia* commentary by Paul Bradshaw, Ed Phillips, and Maxwell Johnson. *The Apostolic Tradition: A Commentary*. A detailed discussion of this question is beyond the scope of this thesis, but of interest are textual challenges related precisely to the content of the bishop’s post-baptismal hand laying prayer and the bestowal of the Holy Spirit. The question is whether the Holy Spirit is a gift of baptism or a later gift of the post-baptismal hand laying prayer.

¹³ Austin, *The Rite of Confirmation*, 12.

¹⁴ Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation*, 247.

martyrdom on September 14, 258. He was the first early church father to cite the Acts 8 event of Peter and John laying hands on the Samaritan converts as justification for episcopal administration of post baptismal rites of hand-laying and consignation.¹⁵

A similar argument was made in a letter written by Pope Innocent I on March 19, 416 to Bishop Decentius of Gubbio, a city about one hundred miles north of Rome, addressing the question of who might administer what post-baptismal rites and where. Bishop Decentius was seeking counsel on the proper administration of the Roman Rite. Innocent I responded:

Regarding the signing of infants, this clearly cannot be done validly by anyone other than the bishop. For even though presbyters are priests, none of them holds the office of pontiff. For not only is it ecclesiastical custom that shows this should be done only by pontiffs—in other words, that they alone would sign or give the comforting Spirit—but there is also that reading in the Acts of the Apostles that describes Peter and John being ordered to give the Holy Spirit to those who had already been baptized. For whether the bishop is present or not, presbyters are allowed to anoint the baptized with chrism. But they are not allowed to sign the forehead with the same oil consecrated by the bishop, for that is used by the bishops only when they give the Spirit, the Paraclete. I cannot reveal the words themselves, lest I seem to betray more than is needed to respond to your inquiry.¹⁶

There are several things to note. First, Innocent insists on the episcopal administration of a post-baptismal anointing as part of the *Roman Rite*, with the laying on of hands inferred from the reference to Acts 8. Innocent states boldly that it is the bishop's responsibility alone, when "delivering the Holy Spirit" to anoint and sign the forehead. The presence of the

¹⁵ Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation*, 91.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 162.

bishop appears to signal validity of the initiatory actions through continuity with the apostolic witness and inclusion of the individual in the one, holy, catholic church.

In the 4th and 5th centuries, after Christianity emerged as a *cultus publicus*, the rites of Christian initiation continued a certain standardization and cross-fertilization as various churches borrowed from one another to construct rites that display a remarkable degree of homogeneity.¹⁷ These rites include a decided preference for celebrating Christian initiation at Easter, after a period of final catechetical preparation in Lent; prebaptismal rites with an exorcistic focus; an almost universal (Romans 6) theological interpretation of baptism; and post-baptismal hand-laying or anointing associated explicitly with the gift or “seal” of the Holy Spirit, still leading to First Communion within a unitive and integral process. Another characteristic, thanks to the controversies faced by Augustine with Pelagianism, was the development of a new theological rationale for the initiation of infants, which focused on the inheritance of “original sin” from Adam. This would have far-reaching consequences for subsequent centuries as infant baptism became the norm for practice and a theology of baptismal regeneration was developed.

3.3 First Reference to Sacramental Status of Confirmation

That post-baptismal ritual including hand-laying, anointing, and consignation associated with the gift or seal of the Holy Spirit would be called confirmation has its own obscure and complex history in the West. The first reference in the West to the terminology

¹⁷ Ibid., 115-200.

of “confirmation” (*confirmare*, “to confirm” or *perficere*, “to perfect”) used in reference to particular rites associated with the ministry of bishops is in Spain and Gaul in the fourth and fifth centuries.¹⁸ Gabriele Winkler has argued that such practices called *confirmare* and *perficere* in conciliar declarations appear to be extraordinary or irregular situations (e.g., after “emergency baptisms,” at the reconciliation of heretics, or in those situations where chrism had not obtained from the bishop by presbyters prior to conferring baptism).¹⁹ It is possible, according to Johnson, that these conciliar references to confirmation do refer to an episcopal act of post-baptismal hand-laying associated with the gift of the Holy Spirit. During this same time period, Jerome (ca. 342-420) knew of bishops in rural areas, who imposed hands on and prayed for the Holy Spirit for neophytes who had been baptized in the absence of bishops.

Faustus of Riez

One Gallican text clearly refers to a separate post-baptismal imposition of hands as a regular part of the rites of Christian initiation during fifth century (or later). In a Pentecost sermon attributed to Bishop Faustus of Riez, the following statement has become classic in Western theology of confirmation:

What the imposition of the hand bestows in confirming individual neophytes, the descent of the Holy Spirit gave people then in the world of believers...the Holy Spirit, who descends upon the waters of baptism by a salvific falling, bestows on the

¹⁸ Ibid., 180. Johnson notes, “As is the case elsewhere, we do not have any liturgical texts of initiation from this period, so the evidence available comes from the accounts of individuals and from local church councils. In Spain, the Council of Elvira (305), The First Council of Toledo (398) and in Gaul, The First Council of Arles (314) and The First Council of Orange (441).”

¹⁹ Ibid., 180.

font a fullness toward innocence, and presents in confirmation an increase for grace. And because in this world we who will be prevailing must walk in every age between invisible enemies and dangers, we are reborn in baptism for life, and we are confirmed after baptism for the strife. In baptism we are washed; after baptism we are strengthened. And although the benefits of rebirth suffice immediately for those about to die, nevertheless the helps of confirmation are necessary for those who will prevail. Rebirth in itself immediately saves those needing to be received in the peace of the blessed age. Confirmation arms and supplies those needing to be preserved for the struggles and battles of this world. But the one who arrives at death after baptism unstained with acquired innocence, is confirmed by death because one can no longer sin after death.²⁰

As we have seen, a key question for Christian initiation is the role of the Holy Spirit. This homily suggests that the Holy Spirit descends upon the waters of baptism by a salvific falling, bestowing innocence. In baptism, the Holy Spirit does salvific work to overcome original sin and restore innocence to the child. In confirmation, the Holy Spirit presents an increase of grace. The homily uses the analogy of war to describe the Christian life as filled with strife, struggles, and battles. This description of the Christian life helps to justify the Western interpretation of confirmation as an extra-baptismal supplication of an additional strengthening dimension to the gift of the Holy Spirit through hand-laying. “Confirmation arms and supplies those needing to be preserved for the struggles and battles of this world,” Faustus proclaims. There is no reference to a subsequent anointing at all.

In the Western Church, Faustus’ homily would come to play a major role in the development of confirmation as a distinctive rite administered by the bishop involving a hand-laying prayer and anointing and interpreted theologically as a strengthening conferral of the Holy Spirit. His words about “confirmation” were later attributed to a fictitious pope

²⁰ Ibid., 184-185.

named Melchiades and were cited as such in a collection of forged papal documents known as the *False Decretals*.²¹ In the Middle Ages, these *Decretals* were considered as authentic and from them Faustus' words would pass into what is known as the *Decretum* of Gratian, a 12th-century legal document, that was to serve as the foundation for canon law in the medieval period. From there Peter the Lombard incorporated Faustus' interpretation of "confirmation" into his famous *Sentences*.²² And it was Lombard's *Sentences* that would serve as the basic introductory textbook for the study of theology throughout the Middle Ages. Not surprisingly, then, it is on the basis of Lombard's *Sentences* that Thomas Aquinas could write in his own important and highly influential *Summa Theologiae* a treatment of confirmation:

...people also receive a spiritual life through baptism, which is spiritual regeneration. But in confirmation people receive as it were a certain mature age of spiritual life. For this reason, Pope Melchiades says, "The Holy Spirit who descends upon the waters of baptism in a salvific falling bestows on the font a fullness toward innocence. In confirmation it presents an increase for grace. In baptism we are reborn for life. After baptism we are strengthened." And therefore it is clear that confirmation is a special sacrament.²³

²¹ Ibid., 253-255.

²² Theologian Justus Hunter offered the following word in a Twitter conversation: "Scholastics were usually fine with these kinds of sources, and often knew their historical origins were suspect. They still used them for their disputations if they clearly set forth some generally accepted piety. The 'sentences' were useful that way." (@JustusHunter, Twitter, March 3, 2019).

²³ Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation*, 254.

Confirmation emerges in the medieval West not just as a distinct rite, separate from baptism itself, but as a special sacrament of the Holy Spirit conferring an increase of grace, strength to live and fight the battles of the Christian life, and as a sacrament of “maturity.”²⁴

The development in medieval Catholicism of confirmation as a sacrament of strength and an increase of grace by the Holy Spirit, separate from baptism, must also be seen in relationship to the dominance of infant baptism and changes in Eucharistic reception and overall piety. That is, Augustine’s emphasis on “original sin” as a rationale for infant initiation becomes increasingly from the 9th century on a principle mandating infant baptism as soon as possible after birth. Similarly, after Lateran Council IV in 1215 linked the reception of Holy Communion with confession for those at the age of reason (generally understood as age seven), a separation of years between infant baptism and First Communion also developed. And it is important to note that the sacrament of confirmation itself was apparently widely neglected as well.²⁵ Gerard Austin, in fact, says that frequent diocesan and synodical legislation throughout medieval Europe about the necessity of having children confirmed by age one, three, seven, and/or ten demonstrates that such was not happening and that, as a result, confirmation became the “neglected sacrament.”²⁶

3.4 The Disintegration of the Rites of Christian Initiation

The development of rites of Christian initiation in the West was not inevitable. The Churches of the East allowed priests to confirm, with episcopally-consecrated chrism, those

²⁴ Ibid., 255.

²⁵ Ibid., 255-256.

²⁶ Austin, *The Rite of Confirmation*, 31.

whom they have baptized and to communicate them at the same time. The East was thus able to preserve the unitive integrity of the primitive rite of initiation even to the present day. The Western Church, by the seventh century had rites of Christian initiation that functioned as an integrated and related process. The integrated and unitive rites of initiation in Rome through the twelfth century were broken up into separate rites and distinct sacraments.

The classic study of this disintegration remains J.D.C. Fisher's 1965 book *Christian Initiation: Baptism in the Medieval West*.²⁷ Fisher articulates the disintegration of the baptismal liturgy of the Western Church in a series of four developments over the next thousand years: (1) the separation of confirmation from baptism; (2) the separation of communion reception from Christian initiation; (3) the separation of initiation from Easter/Pentecost; and (4) the fragmentation of the unitive rite of initiation into three distinct sacraments separated further by increasingly large intervals of time. The basic pattern of initiation looked like this:

1. Baptism in infancy, with the post-baptismal anointing, with chrism given by a priest;
2. First Confession at age seven in preparation for First Communion;
3. First Communion;

²⁷ J.D.C. Fisher. *Christian Initiation: Baptism in the Medieval West*, Alcuin Club Collections, xlvii (London, 1965). Fisher's work was preceded by an important article by J.G. Davies entitled "The Disintegration of the Christian Initiation Rite," Alec Vidler, Ed. *Theology: A Monthly Review* Vol. L, January-December, (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1947). Davies was the first to argue that the medieval Western Church underwent a sacramental dissolution, disintegration, and separation.

4. Confirmation by a bishop at age seven (or later), either before or after First Communion, depending upon the availability of the bishop and the responsibility of parents and parish clergy.

3.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have sketched the contours of the development in the West of rites of Christian initiation in general and confirmation in particular. Much more could be said about the evolution and interpretation of the rites of Christian initiation, especially in England from the eighth to the sixteenth centuries,²⁸ from the assumption of infant confirmation and communication to the logistical challenges of episcopal administration, to the widespread negligence of parents bringing forward children for confirmation, to Archbishop Peckham's attempt in 1281 to obviate this "damnable negligence" with a new sanction requiring confirmation for admittance to the Eucharist. But all of this is beyond the scope of this paper.²⁹ It is enough for now to see that in late medieval England the rites of Christian initiation ordinarily began with baptism in early infancy; continued with confirmation, usually at the age of "discretion" (seven or eight); and culminated with admission to communion. Confirmation was understood as a special sacrament associated with the gift of the Holy Spirit. It was administered by a bishop and received by a sevenfold prayer, hand-laying, consignation, and chrismation.

²⁸ Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation*, 232. Johnson writes, "From the 8th to the 12th centuries the Roman rite of initiation underwent little change; most of the ceremonies of the Gel. and Ordo XI have been preserved, the pattern of the rite is unchanged, and its integrity unimpaired, baptism, confirmation, and first communion still being, as in primitive times, three parts of one coherent whole."

²⁹ See J.D.C. Fisher, *Christian Initiation: Baptism in the Medieval West*, 78-87; 120-140.

We are in a better position to understand why Wesley removed the rite of confirmation for American Methodism. However, we still need to consider the evolution and interpretation of the rite of confirmation in the Church of England from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. It is to that history that the next chapter is devoted.

Chapter Four. Confirmation in the Church of England

The Church of England inherited from medieval Roman Catholicism the rite of confirmation as a special sacrament. When the rite of confirmation was written into the first Prayer Book—a national liturgy that was forged with the fire, anvil, and hammer of the continental Reformation—it was reinterpreted as a rite of profession requiring catechetical preparation. Richard Osmer writes that understanding the evolution of confirmation in the Church of England requires an awareness of these two distinct interpretations of the rite—one *sacramental*, and the other *professional*.¹ He writes:

The first maintains continuity with medieval theology and the practice of the Roman Catholic Church. It views confirmation *sacramentally*, although a sacrament based on tradition and not of equal status to the two ‘gospel sacraments.’ In this pattern, initiation into the church is not seen as complete until a bishop, standing in apostolic succession, confirms persons who have been baptized by performing certain sacramental acts. In some cases, this follows Baptism immediately; in others it takes place at a later point in conjunction with the bishop’s sacramental act. The second pattern maintains continuity with the continental reformation and views confirmation along *professional* lines as the individual’s ratification of the baptismal covenant. This pattern includes a strong *catechetical* subelement, however. Historically, the Anglican tradition has linked study of the catechism and confirmation quite closely. Moreover, its confirmation service often has included confession of the Apostles’ Creed as an act in which the confirmand joins the church universal in confessing the one faith. The present confirmation service, for example, uses the Apostles’ Creed in interrogatory form. For the most part, however, this catechetical element remains subordinate to the *professional* purpose of confirmation: ratification of the baptismal covenant. In this pattern, the bishop plays a representative and symbolic function, not a sacramental one, receiving the confirmands’ professions on behalf of the whole church and praying that the Spirit will continue to strengthen them in a lifelong journey of faith.²

¹ Richard Robert Osmer, *Confirmation: Presbyterian Practices in Ecumenical Perspective* (Louisville: Geneva), 98-101.

² *Ibid.*, 98-99.

While the rite of confirmation would no longer be counted a sacrament, the task of reinterpreting and integrating the rite into the theology and practice of the Church of England fell to Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1532 and 1556. Cranmer revised the initiatory rites in 1549, the date of the first *Book of Common Prayer*, which was revised again in 1552 and lightly amended in 1662. The *Book of Common Prayer* was the first comprehensive compendium of worship in English. The 1662 version was the Prayer Book John Wesley would have known, loved, prayed, and revised.

4.1 Confirmation in the Sarum Manual

Cranmer wrote the first Prayer Book, but he did not cut his text from whole cloth.³ He had on his desk the *Sarum Manual*, a local adaptation of the old Roman rite, which had long been employed by the priests and monks in the Cathedral and Diocese of Salisbury.⁴ The *Manual* had gained wider currency across England, Scotland, and Wales.⁵ On the eve of the Reformation the most widely used rites of baptism and confirmation were those

³ James Wood, Introduction to the 350th Anniversary Edition of *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012), vii.

⁴ The local medieval rites at Lyons, Paris, Rouen, York, and Salisbury, were not different liturgies. They are all simply the Roman rites with slight local variations.

⁵ J.D.C. Fisher, *Christian Initiation: The Reformation Period*, Alcuin Club Collections 51 (London: SPCK, 1970), 85-86. According to Fisher, there were other rites in use in England—the *Stowe Missal* which originated in Ireland and may have continued to be used until the twelfth century, and the *Leofric Missal*, in use in the cathedral church of Exeter in the eleventh century. Here infants are baptized and vested in their chismals and then communicated by the presbyter without any indication that a bishop might be present to lay his hand upon them; moreover the bishop's prayer invoking the sevenfold Spirit appeared elsewhere among a number of prayers called "consecrations." A rubric requiring the baptized to be communicated and also confirmed with chrism, if a bishop was present, was found in the eleventh century Missal of Robert of Jumièges, Archbishop of Canterbury. However, the *Sarum Manual* was widely used and it became a source influencing future worship through the Prayer Book tradition.

contained in the *Sarum Manual* which employed a “two-stage” pattern of initiation. It allowed for the water-washing of baptism to be administered by a presbyter, but the post-baptismal anointing—the sign of the sacrament of confirmation—could only be administered by the bishop. Confirmation in England frequently was separated from the water-washing and administered at a later time.

The *Sarum Manual* assumed that both baptism and confirmation were sacraments.

The administration of the sacrament of confirmation began with a prayer:

Almighty and everlasting God who has deigned to regenerate these your servants (or these your handmaids) by water and the Holy Spirit, and has given unto them remission of all their sins, send upon them the sevenfold Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, from heaven. Amen. The Spirit of wisdom and understanding. Amen. The Spirit of knowledge and piety. Amen. The Spirit of counsel and fortitude. Amen. And fill them with the Spirit of the fear of the Lord. Amen. And sign them with the sign of the holy cross and confirm them with the chrism of salvation unto life eternal. Amen.⁶

The foundation of the prayer is the biblical image of new birth by water and the Spirit (John 3:5). The prayer associated the rite of confirmation with the reception of the Holy Spirit. It showed the continuity of English initiatory rites with ancient Roman practice. The invocation of the sevenfold gifts of the Holy Spirit, inspired by Isaiah 11:1-2,⁷ went all the

⁶ E.C. Whitaker, *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy*, 306-307.

⁷ “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord” (Isaiah 11:1-2).

way back to the *Gelasian Sacramentary* of the seventh century.⁸ The significant liturgical action of the Sarum rite was the signing of the child with the cross in chrism while saying:

I sign thee N. with the sign of the cross + and I confirm thee with the chrism of salvation, in the name of the Father + and the Son + and the Holy Ghost. + Amen.

The *Sarum Manual* understood the rite of confirmation to be a sacrament associated with the gift of the Holy Spirit. It involved episcopal administration, hand-laying, anointing, and consignation. Cranmer was referencing the *Sarum Manual*, but he was also engaging sources and voices of the continental Reformation, particularly the work of Martin Bucer.

4.2 Martin Bucer's Reinterpretation of Confirmation

The Reformers generally had a negative view of the rite of confirmation. They worried about its sacramental definition, the association of the rite with episcopal administration, and the diminishment of baptism. The origin of these critiques can be found in the detailed attack against the medieval sacramental system leveled first in 1520 by Martin Luther in a treatise entitled *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*.⁹ Claiming that just as the Jews had been captive in Babylon in the sixth-century B.C.E. so the true meaning of the sacraments and Christian freedom itself had been held captive by the Roman Catholic Church, Luther laid the foundation for all subsequent Protestant sacramental theology. He argued that the number of the sacraments should be reduced from seven to three—baptism,

⁸ The *Gelasian Sacramentary*, a liturgical book for the use of the presider at several liturgical rites, shows the ritual structure of the Roman initiatory practice from the seventh century.

⁹ Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation*, 315.

penance, and the eucharist, thus excluding confirmation from the category.¹⁰ With the flair of anti-Roman polemic, Luther was particularly scathing in his critique of confirmation as it existed in the late medieval Church. He called it nothing more than *affenspiel* (“monkey business”), and *gaukelwerk* (“mumbo jumbo”).¹¹ Calvin would be more severe: “I regard it as one of the most deadly wiles of Satan.”¹² A comprehensive overview of the critiques of the Reformers from Calvin to Zwingli is beyond the scope of this paper.¹³ I want to focus attention on the way in which Luther’s critiques of the rites of Christian initiation influenced Cranmer and the other English reformers, particularly through the work of German theologian, Martin Bucer.

Martin Bucer was a young Dominican monk who became a fierce advocate for Martin Luther’s reforms in Germany which led to his excommunication and exile.¹⁴ After his exile Bucer was in conversation with many of the major players in the Protestant Reformation. He read and corresponded with Ulrich Zwingli; serving as a mediating role between Luther and Zwingli. He was in conversation with John Calvin. This is not to say Bucer’s work was derivative. He was a creative mind who was active in the reinterpretation of theology both on the continent and later in England. Nowhere was Bucer’s influence felt

¹⁰ Fisher, 61.

¹¹ Arthur Repp, *Confirmation in the Lutheran Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), 15.

¹² J.D.C. Fisher, *Christian Initiation: The Reformation Period*, Alcuin Club Collections 51 (London: SPCK, 1970), 254.

¹³ Osmer’s *Confirmation* does an excellent job of concisely giving an overview of changes in confirmation during the Reformation period. Pages 59-86.

¹⁴ Osmer, 78-81. Richard Osmer has done an excellent job drawing together the threads of Bucer’s life and theology that allowed him to reinterpret the rite of confirmation.

more greatly than in his work on catechetical instruction and confirmation. Martin Bucer has been called “the father of evangelical confirmation.”¹⁵

Like all the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformers, Bucer was interested in the overall shape and interpretation of rites of Christian initiation beginning with baptism. He prescribed public administration of baptism within Sunday worship and strongly emphasized the role of godparents and sponsors in undertaking an obligation to guarantee that the one to be baptized would not only be raised in the Christian faith but would be provided with extensive catechetical instruction.¹⁶ These liturgical emphases are rooted in theological presuppositions. Anglican liturgiologist Bryan Spinks has drawn attention to a contrast between what he calls “Luther’s unilateral approach to baptism” and the “bilateral covenant” more characteristic of Zwingli and Bucer.¹⁷ In distinction to Luther’s understanding of baptism as the objective, salvific, and effective sacramental act of God here and now through water and the Spirit, which can only be *received* by human beings in faith, but is *not* given as a consequence of faith; the theology of Zwingli and Bucer tended to emphasize the necessity of promises, duties, and obligations on the part of parents, sponsors, and the community as the very condition *for* giving the baptism. In other words, if Luther’s approach to baptism was unilateral and unconditional, the approach of Zwingli and Bucer appeared to make baptism conditional and bilateral, dependent not only on the promise of God but on

¹⁵ Amy Nelson Burnett, “Martin Bucer and the Anabaptist Context of Evangelical Confirmation.” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 68 (1994), 95.

¹⁶ Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation*, 328.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 330. Johnson references Spinks, “Luther’s Timely Theology of Unilateral Baptism,” 23-45.

the prior faith-response of the parents and godparents. Baptism becomes a pledge and oath that the infant, who by birth to Christian parents is already part of God's elect will be brought up in the Christian faith and one day make his or her own faith response. Osmer argues:

It is this theological framework that informs Bucer's understanding of the relationship between catechetical instruction and confirmation. Of all the Reformers, Bucer alone developed his understanding of catechetical instruction in relation to confirmation. Zwingli and Calvin believed that baptism entails catechetical instruction, and Bucer argued that catechetical instruction entails confirmation. By this he meant a heartfelt profession of faith and pledge of obedience in which the essential tenets of the faith are not merely grasped intellectually but are appropriated personally. This alone is a sign that the Spirit is at work in a person's life, leading to ratification of the baptismal covenant.¹⁸

Bucer does nothing less than reinterpret the rite of confirmation for Protestantism. Confirmation's role as the completion and perfection of baptism (and as the gift of the fullness of the Spirit preparing for the reception of the Eucharist) was reinterpreted into something totally new: namely, a personal, mature ratification of one's earlier baptism. This ratification or affirmation of baptism required new catechetical rites. He used the rite of confirmation to combine the Reformers' desire to catechize every baptized Christian with the public rite of personal profession. However, he does not conflate the catechetical preparation and the liturgical rite. He drew a clear distinction between the learning taking place in catechetical instruction and the personal profession or pledge associated with ratification of the baptismal covenant in confirmation.

¹⁸ Osmer, *Confirmation*, 78.

At the invitation of Hermann von Wied, Archbishop of Cologne (1515-1546) and Lutheran sympathizer, Bucer and Philip Melancthon (one of Luther's close colleagues, who authored both the *Augsburg Confession* and its *Apology*), went to Cologne to assist in the reformation of the church there. Composed principally by Bucer and accepted by Hermann in 1543, this German *Church Order* contained, among other liturgical services, a rite of "Confirmation of Children Baptized and Solemn Profession of Their Faith in Christ, and of Their Obedience to be Showed to Christ and to His Congregation." It specifically mentions admitting catechumens "to the table of the Lord" after laying hands on them. After answering a series of questions, hands are laid on the children with the prayer "Confirm this thy servant with thy Holy Spirit, that he may continue in the obedience of thy gospel." *Einfultigs Bedencken*, translated into Latin in 1545 as the *Pia Deliberatio*, and, finally in 1548 into English as *A simple and religious consultation of us Hermann by the grace of God Archbishop of Cologne...*(or, simply, the *Consultation*) was to play a role in the English Reformation. It was through this work that Bucer's understanding of confirmation would exert tremendous influence on the Anglican tradition.

4.3 Confirmation in the Book of Common Prayer

In the 1549 *Book of Common Prayer* Thomas Cranmer made use both of Hermann's *Consultation* and the *Sarum Manual* for his reforms of the rites of baptism and confirmation.¹⁹ Cranmer's revision was in some ways very conservative, retaining many medieval elements.

¹⁹ Johnson, 340-341.

Confirmation retained the prayer invoking the sevenfold gifts of the Holy Spirit, which implied that even if confirmation was not to be interpreted as a sacrament it would have a residual sacramental quality. Confirmation would not be a sacrament, but it would require episcopal administration.

Cranmer followed Bucer by linking confirmation to a catechism, an instruction to be learned by every child, before he be brought to be confirmed by the bishop. Cranmer stepped away from the medieval sacramental view by his abolition of the chrism, which was seen as superstitious and unscriptural. He would remove the signing of the cross in 1552. He would retain the biblical laying on of hand by the bishop and this prayer which read, “Defend, O Lord, this child with thy heavenly grace, that he may continue thine forever, and daily increase in thy Holy Spirit more and more, until he come unto thy everlasting kingdom. Amen.”

The 1662 BCP basically remained the same as Cranmer’s 1552 edition, with some minimal expansion. In the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*, The Order of Confirmation, or, Laying on of Hands upon those that are baptized and come to years of Discretion was structured as follows:

- a. Opening Rubrics
- b. Preface
- c. Renewal of baptismal vow
- d. Versicles and responses
- e. Prayer for sevenfold gifts
- f. Kneel and imposition
- g. Confirmation prayer
- h. Liturgical greeting
- i. Lord’s Prayer
- j. Collect

- k. Collect
- l. Episcopal Blessing
- m. Final rubric²⁰

The 1662 rite adds some new material: a. opening rubrics, b. the preface, i. the Lord's Prayer, and k. the collect. The title was expanded to separate the rite of confirmation from the catechism. The new preface situated the rite in the context of catechism and ratification of the baptismal promise (without using the language of covenant).²¹ It specified that the rite is for children who had reached "an age of discretion."

4.4 An Unresolved Tension in the English Rite of Confirmation

The English rite of confirmation was a work of a creative theological mind which sought to be responsive to the medieval sacramental tradition while also being open to protestant reform. The central liturgical action of the rite was a laying on of hands by the bishop accompanied by this prayer, "Defend, O Lord, this child with thy heavenly grace, that he may continue thine forever, and daily increase in thy Holy Spirit more and more, until he come unto thy everlasting kingdom. Amen." Tovey writes that this prayer for the increase of the Holy Spirit rested "on the old scholastic view of confirmation that the Spirit begins work in the infant candidate from baptism; confirmation is a strengthening of that work at the entry into reason and responsibility. These two elements, renewal of baptismal

²⁰ Tovey, *Anglican Confirmation*, (New York: Ashgate Publishing, 2014), 43.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 44.

promises and increase of the Spirit, begin to develop as a tension in the mind of many Anglican thinkers.”²²

Tovey is articulating the same tension Richard Osmer described between two interpretations of the rite—sacramental and professional. It is a tension between (1) the objective, salvific, and effective sacramental act of God here and now through water and the Spirit, *received* by human beings in faith, and (2) the subjective faith response by human beings.

The 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* was the official prayerbook of the Church of England throughout the rest of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Throughout the eighteenth century there were multiple proposals for revision from Unitarians, Nonjurors, Puritans, Latitudinarians, and from growing churches in Scotland and America. Tovey writes again,

Among the proposed revisions of 1662 two trends are seen: those who emphasize the human renewal of the baptismal covenant and those who emphasize the work of the Spirit. The former wanted to strengthen the renewal of the covenant introduced in 1662. They also wanted to question the nature of regeneration at baptism, referred to in the confirmation service. Was this regeneration an internal spiritual one (a position that John Wesley seems to have taken), or was it a ‘federal one’—i.e. the infant candidate being brought into the society of the church but not necessarily with any inward change?²³

These theological emphases continued to shape the debate about the role of the rite of confirmation within the church.

²² Ibid., 44.

²³ Ibid., 58.

They can be seen in the development of various theologies of confirmation during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the relationship between baptism and confirmation, the role of the Spirit in both is a key theological question each writer answers in slightly nuanced ways. Jeremy Taylor, the seventeenth-century high church bishop, published a *Discourse on Confirmation* in 1663. By baptism we are heirs, adopted into the inheritance, admitted to the covenant of grace according to Taylor. Then he stresses the work of the Holy Spirit in confirmation as the completion of baptism:

As God at first appointed us a ministry of a new birth; so also hath he given to his church the consequent ministry of new strength. The Spirit moved a little upon the waters of baptism, and gave us the principles of life; but in confirmation he makes us able to move ourselves. In the first he is the Spirit of life; but in this he is the Spirit of strength and motion.²⁴

One hears an echo of the scholastic arguments based upon the Pentecostal sermon of Faustus of Riez. The emphasis is on confirmation as divine action of giving the Holy Spirit, not simply as a human ratification of the baptismal covenant. Taylor sums up his view here:

Confirmation is the consummation and perfection, the corroboration and strength of baptism and baptismal grace; for in baptism we undertake to do our duty, but in confirmation we receive strength to do it; in baptism others promise for us, in confirmation we undertake for ourselves, we ease our godfathers and godmothers of their burden, and take it upon our own shoulders, together with the advantage of the prayers of the bishop and all the church made then on our behalf; in baptism we give up our names to Christ, but in confirmation we put our seal to the profession, and God puts His seal to the promise.²⁵

²⁴ Jeremy Taylor, *Discourse on Confirmation*. Thomas K. Carroll, Ed. *Jeremy Taylor: Selected Works*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 255-256.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 256.

Taylor's work is a sustained theological argument for confirmation with a stress on the work of the Spirit. It is more than a renewal of baptismal vows; it is an empowerment of the Spirit.

Samuel Clarke, the eighteenth century philosopher, writes one of the longest sustained discussions of confirmation in the period in *Three Practical Essays on Baptism, Confirmation, and Repentance*.²⁶ Clarke is working not from a theology of the sacraments, but rather from a Newtonian philosophy of religion. He is interested in the question of how one is converted to the religious life. He conceives the religious life as “a state of virtue” and a “settled peace of conscience.” Clarke places the stress on the ethical dimension of the religious life. There are three points of entry into this life: baptism, confirmation, and repentance. Each of these practices clearly marks the beginning point of one's commitment. “In those who have been educated from their infancy in the Christian religion,” writes Clarke, “the period from whence their religious life ought to be dated, is confirmation; the time from their baptism being only their preparation, or time of instruction.” Clark's conception of confirmation dramatizes the opposite end of the spectrum from Jeremy Taylor. He deemphasizes the role of the divine in order to heighten the importance of human conversion and commitment to a radically different ethical life. Confirmation in this scheme does not involve the bestowal of the Holy Spirit; it is a human event whereupon a

²⁶ Samuel Clarke, *Three Practical Essays on Baptism, Confirmation, and Repentance: Containing Full Instructions for a Holy Life: With Earnest Exhortations, especially to young Persons, drawn from the Consideration of the Severity of the Discipline of the Primitive Church*, Seventh Edition, (London: Printed for John and Paul Knapton, in Ludgate-Street. MDCCLIV), 40-41.

person ratifies one's baptismal vows and marks the beginning of a commitment to the religious life.

There are many other theologies of confirmation written during this period.²⁷ Each writer offered a unique emphasis, but the underlying theological theme was covenant. Some, like Taylor, stressed the pneumatological work of God in confirmation. Others, like Clarke, emphasized confirmation as the trailhead of personal commitment in religious life and virtue following God's commandments. In baptism, an individual has entered into a covenant with the triune God. In confirmation, the baptismal covenant is reaffirmed through the laying-on of hands by the bishop.

4.5 Confirmation in Eighteenth Century England

Up to this point, the focus of historical research has been primarily on the ritual texts themselves, due both to the nature of the source material and the scope of my project. One common presumption among liturgical scholars and historians, which impacts interpretation of Wesley's decision to remove the rite, has been that the rite of confirmation in the Church of England was in decline in the eighteenth century due to neglect. There have been two major studies of confirmation in the Church of England in the last century. The first was done in 1926 by S.L. Ollard and the second in 2014 by Phillip Tovey.²⁸ It will be helpful to take a cursory look at these studies before moving on to John Wesley.

²⁷ Tovey, *Anglican Confirmation*, 7-29.

²⁸ S.L. Ollard, "Confirmation in the Anglican Communion," in *Confirmation or the Laying on of Hands* (London: SPCK, 1926), 162-63.

S.L. Ollard studied confirmation from 1500 to 1850 and considered most of the views on confirmation expressed during this very long period. Ollard argued that confirmation was generally neglected in the eighteenth century following the well-trodden Anglo-Catholic view of the history of the Church of England which views a golden age of Anglican thought and practice during the seventeenth century among the Caroline Divines, an eighteenth-century decline with an insufficient evangelical revival, and then a great resurgence in the nineteenth century led by the Tractarians, the heroes of modern Anglicanism. Ollard wrote, “After the brilliance of Jeremy Taylor’s work all lights burn dim.” Later he reported, “The administration of confirmation at the end of the eighteenth century and at the beginning of the nineteenth seems to have become in some dioceses, if not generally, a grave scandal.”²⁹ Ollard’s view that confirmation was neglected by the eighteenth century Church of England and its bishops underlies a common perception among liturgical scholars exploring Wesley’s removal of the rite.³⁰

In the last decade, Ollard’s work has been challenged by Phillip Tovey. Tovey argues, contrary to Ollard, that confirmation was an important part of the life of the eighteenth-century church.³¹ Tovey examined a variety of evidence—canon law, clerical manuals, visitation addresses, biographical and autobiographical material, and newspaper articles—to show that, contrary to prevailing assumptions, the practice of confirmation in the Church of

²⁹ Ibid., 213.

³⁰ Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, “Sacraments and Life-Cycle Rituals” *The Cambridge Companion to American Methodism*. Edited by Jason E. Vickers. (New York: Cambridge University Press), 147-48.

³¹ Philip Tovey, *Anglican Confirmation*, (New York: Ashgate Publishing, 2014).

England was quite strong. He reconstructed a complex picture of the church in its confirmation practice from the perspective of bishops, clergy, and laity. Tovey argued that, though there were some exceptions, most bishops, priests and people took confirmation and the preparation for it seriously. Even those clergy who were critical of practice were so in order to enhance the spiritual nature of the rite.

The rite of confirmation was administered to children, according to the rubrics in the Prayer Book, by the bishop of the diocese. The bishops spent the majority of the year in London and made visits to their diocese only during a few months. Tovey noted that while there were a few bishops who were unable to conduct confirmation tours, not least due to age and health, the majority were diligent in conducting diocesan work of visitation and confirmation. During episcopal visits, the bishops ordained and exhorted their priests, visited their parishes, and hosted large scale, day-long confirmation services in a number of diocesan centers. One of the significant factors in this period was the large number of people who came to confirmation services. Bishops routinely confirmed over 1,000 children in one day. The largest single example discovered was in Manchester, where over 5,000 were confirmed in one day.³²

Throughout the eighteenth century, the large scale confirmation services when the bishop came to town created a festival-like atmosphere that was an important part of eighteenth-century folk religion. Contrary to Ollard, Tovey argues that confirmation was not

³² Tovey, 167.

neglected as a practice; however, he does acknowledge that confirmation could feel large and impersonal.

4.6 Conclusion

For two chapters we have been tracing the development of the rite of confirmation in the West in general, and the unique historical and theological tensions that emerge in the Church of England in particular. The aim of this analysis has not been to exhaustively examine the evolution and interpretation of the rite, but rather to provide some background and texture to one of the primary questions of the thesis: why does John Wesley would remove the rite of confirmation from the *Sunday Service*? It is time to ask the question again and to continue the search for an answer.

Chapter Five. The Removal of the Rite of Confirmation

“If ever there was a year,” wrote Frank Baker, “when Wesley could be said to have irrevocably severed himself and Methodism from the Church of England, it was 1784.”¹ Wesley was scrambling to meet the sacramental crisis in America and to ensure continuity between the Methodist revival in England and American Methodism which was, by “an uncommon train of providences,” rapidly becoming a church. Although the seeds of separation had long been sown, 1784 was the year Wesley secured the legal incorporation of Methodism as a distinct denomination, embraced presbyterial ordination in practice as well as in theory, and prepared to publish a drastic revision of the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*.² Wesley published *The Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America: With Other Occasional Services* and provided it to Thomas Coke, Francis Asbury, and the Brethren in North America in order to shape the liturgical life of American Methodism. For the purposes of this thesis, the most significant revision was Wesley’s decision to remove the liturgical rite of confirmation in the materials he provided for American Methodism. In this chapter, I will explore possible reasons why Wesley removed it.

5.1 The Rites of Christian Initiation in John Wesley’s Life

One might begin by looking for clues in John Wesley’s biography. He was born on June 17, 1703 at Epworth rectory, Lincolnshire, the thirteenth or fourteenth child of Samuel Wesley, rector of Epworth, and his wife, Susanna Wesley. He was baptized as an infant on

¹ Frank Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England*, (London: Epworth Press, 1970), 218.

² *Ibid.*, 218.

July 3 at Epworth Church. John lived at the Epworth rectory until he was ten years old under the firm yet affectionate parenting of his mother and father. “While catechesis had fallen into significant disregard in eighteenth-century Anglicanism,” wrote Randy Maddox, “this was not the case at the Wesley household where Susanna emphasized religious education of her children, with a specific concern for shaping their character.”³ Susanna’s method of raising children always remained with John. While he was a tutor at Lincoln College, he requested from his mother a description of her techniques and rules, which he subsequently published in his journal at her death.⁴ Some of Susanna’s disciplinary measures seem severe at this distance—her comments about teaching children to fear the rod and to cry softly, her desire to conquer the will of children for the sake of obedience—but her views are mostly in keeping with conventional religious views of the day. The Bible was the core of formation for the Wesley household in public worship, private education, and family prayer.⁵ As soon as the children could speak, they were taught the Lord’s Prayer, “which they were made to say at rising and bedtime constantly.” To this were added “a short prayer for their parents, and some collects; a short catechism, and some portions of Scripture, as their memories could bear.” There was a focus not only on gaining religious knowledge but cultivating an obedient disposition and pattern of action. Susanna set aside an hour or so every evening for discussing spiritual and moral problems with each child in turn.⁶ Thursday

³ Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 225-226.

⁴ The entry dated August 1, 1742, in *Journals and Diaries II*, in *Works*, 19:286-91.

⁵ Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England*, 8-9.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

evening was given to Jacky, and even when he was a grown man Wesley referred longingly to those sacred times.

John Wesley was confirmed as a nine-year-old (it seems almost certain) on July 15, 1712 alongside eight hundred others by William Wake, bishop of Lincoln, in the Epworth parish church.⁷ Four months earlier in April 1712, five of the nine children at home were sick with smallpox. Susanna reported to her husband, Samuel:

Jack has bore his disease bravely, like a man, and indeed like a Christian, without any complaint, though he seemed angry at the smallpox when they were sore—as we guessed by his looking sourly at them, for he never said anything.⁸

When Samuel returned to Epworth from London, where he had been at Convocation, he found Jacky recovered from smallpox, “but so matured, so clear and convincing in his rational faith and spiritual dedication, that he had no hesitation in admitting the boy to communion long before he had reached the normal age of sixteen.”⁹

Thus, John Wesley participated in the rites of Christian initiation as follows—infant baptism, catechesis, first communion, and then confirmation. Some have suggested that Wesley’s dissatisfaction with the rite of confirmation may have stemmed from the impersonal manner of his own confirmation, but that is unclear.

Wesley’s education continued at Charterhouse, a boarding school for boys in London, and then Christ Church, Oxford. At age 20, he considered holy orders as a means

⁷ Ibid., 10. Cf. the detailed study of confirmation practice in this time in Sykes, *Church and State*, pp. 115-37, 429-36.

⁸ Ibid., 10.

⁹ Ibid., 10. Gayle Felton reports that Samuel had already given communion to his son when John was eight years old in 1711 (*This Gift of Water*, 23.)

to becoming an Oxford Don. He was ordained deacon on September 19, 1725, elected a fellow of Lincoln College on March 17, 1726, and ordained a priest in the Church of England on September 22, 1728 by Dr. John Potter, Bishop of Oxford. After serving briefly as a curate for his father at Epworth (1726-1729), he was invited back to Oxford by Dr. George Morley, rector of Lincoln College, to share more fully in the duties of resident fellows and to serve as a full-time tutor. At Oxford he continued lifelong experimentation in personal and communal spiritual practices through which he sought, at times diligently and at times desperately, to grow in holiness of heart and life. From 1735-1738, Wesley served in the American colonies as a missionary to Georgia. "In his younger days, Wesley was a rigorous high-churchman," writes Charles Hohenstein, "who insisted on enforcing the rubrical provisions of the Prayerbook...He arrived in Georgia determined to enforce the liturgy of the Prayer Book according to his own high-church conscience, but failed miserably in the attempt, and ultimately came to regret his earlier inflexibility and lack of common sense."¹⁰

John Wesley returned to England in 1738 discouraged. According to Methodist lore, Wesley experienced a single dramatic moment of conversion. It became known as Wesley's Aldersgate experience, so called after the location (Aldersgate Street) of the prayer meeting where Wesley says that he found the personal assurance that Christ had died for his *own* sins. The importance of this one event has probably been exaggerated; Wesley experienced

¹⁰ Charles R. Hohenstein, *The Revisions of the Rites of Baptism in the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1784-1939*, University of Notre Dame PhD Dissertation, 1990.

dramatic moments of religious inspiration on other occasions, nor did Aldersgate assuage all his doubts and melancholy.¹¹ Nonetheless, 1738 clearly marked a crucial turning point in the lives of both John and Charles Wesley. They began an extensive evangelistic ministry expressed in preaching (often in the open air) and in the organization of Methodist societies, classes and bands. Through the subsequent decades, a great evangelical revival guided by the persistent leadership John and Charles Wesley was shed abroad in the British Isles and North America.

Later in life Wesley wrote about baptism in treatises and sermons. He produced catechisms, started religious boarding schools, and published sermons on the importance of family religion and childhood education. He exhorted the early Methodists towards the “Duty of Constant Communion” and “New Birth.” But, he scarcely mentioned confirmation at all.

5.2 The Rite of Confirmation in Wesley’s Writing

Part of the challenge for those interested in John Wesley’s rationale for removing the rite of confirmation is that, while it is possible to find a number of theologies of confirmation during the period, Wesley himself said little about it in a lifetime of sermons and other writings. One place he mentioned confirmation was at the Leeds Conference on Tuesday, May 6, 1755. In a treatise addressing the question “Ought we to separate from the

¹¹ Richard Hiezenrater, “Great Expectations: Aldersgate and the Evidences of Genuine Christianity,” in *Aldersgate Reconsidered*, ed. by Randy L. Maddox. Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1990.

Church of England?,” Wesley took up arguments for separation one by one.¹² He argued that Methodists would not renounce the Church's people nor doctrine, nor refrain from its public service, much less fail to submit to the governors and laws of the Church—to do so would be neither legal nor expedient. Nevertheless, Wesley wrote, “There are some things in the Common Prayer Book itself which we do not undertake to defend.” These included the damnatory clauses in the Athanasian Creed; the expression concerning King Charles the Second, our most religious king; the absolution in the Office for Visiting the Sick; the thanksgiving in the Burial Office; those parts of the Office for Ordaining Bishops, Priests, and Deacons which assert or suppose an essential difference between bishops and presbyters; and also, the Office of Confirmation. This is such a meager clue. The Office of Confirmation is not the focus of the argument. It is not isolated as the only indefensible rite, but rather bundled together with a number of other things. Wesley was addressing wider arguments for and against separating from the Church of England; he was not laying out a treatise on sacraments or the formation of children and youth.

In 1756 Wesley republished an abridged volume in which John Williams is replying to the Roman Catechism.¹³ The Roman Catechism taught that there are seven sacraments. In Williams’ reply to Question. 58—Is confirmation a sacrament?—he acknowledged that the Catechism affirms the sacramental status of confirmation. However, Williams appealed to “the great Schoolman, Alex. Ales” who wrote, “Christ did not institute nor declare

¹² “Ought We to Separate from the Church of England,” §II.4, *Works*, 9:572.

¹³ A Roman Catechism, with a Reply Thereto, Q. 58, *Works* [Jackson], 10:116). *The Works of John Wesley*, Volume X. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958).

confirmation to be a sacrament.” Williams argues that the form, matter, and ceremonies of confirmation cannot be proven by reference to Scripture to be instituted by Christ.

Wesley republished Williams’ Roman Catechism again in 1779 under the title “Popery Calmly Considered,” further distilling it and in places adapting it more into his own language; so that this more thoroughly becomes Wesley’s own voice.¹⁴ Again the argument was made that, because Christ did not institute confirmation, it has no sacramental status at all. But it became more severe. Wesley laid out the ceremonies after baptism including the chrism of confirmation: “First, (the bishop) anoints the top of the child’s head with chrism, as a token of salvation. Secondly, he puts on him a white garment, in token of his innocence. And thirdly, he puts a lighted candle into his hand, in token of the light of faith.” Thereupon, Wesley replied, “Now, what can any man of understanding say in defence of these idle ceremonies, utterly unknown in the primitive Church, as well as unsupported by Scripture? Do they add dignity to the ordinances of God? Do they not rather make it contemptible?”¹⁵ These scant comments do not so much reveal a well-reasoned theological opinion about the rite of confirmation as they do Wesley’s general prejudice against confirmation as an idle ceremony.

These criticisms voiced in *Popery Calmly Considered* underlaid Wesley’s 1784 revision of the *Book of Common Prayer* as the *Sunday Service*. But they do not explain the rationale.

Methodist liturgical scholars from Nolan Harmon, to James White, to Karen Westerfield

¹⁴ *Popery Calmly Considered*, §IV.4, *Works* (Jackson), 10:150-1.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 10:150-1.

Tucker have viewed Wesley's removal of the rite of confirmation within the context of all the revisions Wesley made to the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*. It is helpful to know that Wesley was not alone in his desire and proposal for revision. Phillip Tovey notes that there were fifty proposed revisions of the Prayer Book from 1700-1791.¹⁶ Most of the proposals for Prayer Book revision omit confirmation.¹⁷

5.3 Puritan Critique

Wesley's critiques and, ultimately, his revisions seem to be influenced by this broader set of concerns, particularly as voiced among Puritans. Karen Westerfield Tucker wrote,

Wesley's removal of confirmation may rest on several factors none of which he explicitly delineates. His scant comments about the office of confirmation show an affinity with the long-standing opposition to the rite by the Puritans and other Dissenters (e.g., 'An Admonition to the Parliament' of 1572, the 'Millenary Petition' of 1603, and the Puritan arguments at the Savoy Conference in 1660). Wesley was familiar with their arguments from his reading of history and from his acquaintance with ongoing debates regarding Prayer Book revision and the liturgical comprehension of dissenting groups.¹⁸

The long-standing opposition to the rite of confirmation by the Puritans and other Dissenters rested on an abstract desire for the restoration of purity of New Testament worship. The critiques of the rite of confirmation presented at the 1660 Savoy Conference, in which 12 Presbyterians and 12 bishops of the Church of England debated a prayer book revision. The bishops presented the 1604 *Book of Common Prayer* and solicited revisions from the Presbyterians. The *Exceptions* submitted by the Presbyterians covered the entire Prayer

¹⁶ Tovey, 32.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁸ Westerfield Tucker, *American Methodist Worship*, 82.

Book and included a specific section on confirmation.¹⁹ They had seven points on confirmation:

1. a desire to abolish the last rubric before the catechism;
2. a desire to make sure that candidates understood the catechism;
3. an understanding that there was no need to bring in new godparents at confirmation;
4. an observation that the wording in the prayer for the sevenfold gifts assumed spiritual renewal but this is not evident in many;
5. a view that limiting confirmation to the bishop gives it a higher value than baptism and communion;
6. a statement that the prayer after imposition suggests that confirmation follows the practice of the Apostles, but that this is questionable;
7. that confirmation not be made an absolute requirement to admission to communion.²⁰

The bishops responded to these points in detail in their *Answers*, hardly making any concessions at all. They did quote Hebrews 6 and Acts 8 as justification for the imposition after baptism. The ministers replied to the bishops in stronger terms in their *Replies*. They called confirmation a “popish ceremony,” challenged the presumption that children could be said to be regenerate, gave a plea for primitive episcopacy which would make each minister in effect a bishop, disputed the argument that confirmation comes from the biblical texts Hebrews 6 and Romans 8, and questioned the bishops’ power to give the Holy Spirit.²¹ In the end, the Savoy Conference debates did not have a great impact on the form of the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*. However, it dramatized the disagreements between Anglicans and

¹⁹ Tovey, 36.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 36-37.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

Dissenters, which in terms of confirmation was a contrast of those in favor of confirmation and those who abolished it.²²

The critiques of Puritans and Dissenters resurfaced in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They were reiterated in 1749 in a treatise by John Jones entitled *Free and Candid Disquisitions relating to the Church of England: And the means of advancing religion therein*. We know that Wesley read Jones book in 1750, before the 1755 Leeds Conference.²³

Wesley appeared to follow the Puritans in believing that confirmation as a distinct rite could not be located either in Scripture or in apostolic sources, both of which were essential authorities for his liturgical praxis. But he never spelled out the connection in a sustained way in his writing. It is difficult to draw definitive conclusions from such little evidence.

5.3 Other Possibilities

There are other possibilities. As we have noted, in the Church of England the authorized administrator of confirmation was a bishop. Perhaps, Wesley was hesitant to grant the Methodist “superintendents” authority to administer a liturgical rite associated with episcopal status. At the time the *Sunday Service* was written he still understood Methodism to be operating within the broad framework of Anglicanism. Wesley objected to the use of the term “bishop” in American Methodist documents from 1787 onwards.

²² Ibid., 31.

²³ *Journal* (15-16 August 1750), *Works* 20:357.

It is not as if Wesley's decision was an inevitable outworking of Methodist practice.

John Fletcher wrote a letter to John Wesley on August 1, 1775:

Rev. and dear Sir-

This is the day, your conference with the Methodist preachers begins. You love the Church of England, and yet you are not blind to her freckles, nor insensible of her shackles. Your life is precarious; you have lately been shaken over the grave. You are spared; it may be to take yet some important steps which may influence more generations yet unborn. What, Sir, if you used your liberty as an Englishman, a Christian, a divine, and an extraordinary messenger of God? What, if with lots of modesty you took a farther step toward the reformation of the Church of England.²⁴

In the letter, Fletcher floated the idea of retaining “the important office of confirmation” which “shall be performed with the utmost solemnity by Mr. Wesley or by the Moderators and that none shall be admitted to the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, but such as have been confirmed or are ready to be confirmed.” The rite was left off; but this was not the only option available to Wesley. Wesley made a conscious decision to remove the rite.

Wesley was not working, like John Fletcher, as a parish priest. Wesley's removal of the rite of confirmation was not a rejection of the importance of childhood catechesis. Wesley made catechizing of children a high priority in his work in Georgia. He produced catechisms for use in family discipleship with children of Methodist societies. Additionally, he started boarding schools like Kingswood and Foundrey for poor and working class children. Susan Willhauck has argued that the mature Wesley valued childhood conversion

²⁴ Letters from John Fletcher to John Wesley. *The Asbury Theological Journal*. Vol. 53. No. 1. Spring 1998, pp. 93-94.

experiences.²⁵ However, Wesley was operating as a missional evangelist using the means of field preaching to awaken and convict adults to their need for God's grace. "Whenever this means was effective," wrote Maddox, "he ushered the awakened person into the society where the full battery of means of grace could nourish and guide their further journey on the Way of Salvation."²⁶ Ongoing participation in a society rather than a single event of confirmation was a more robust means by which to ensure an individual's growth in holiness. Randy Maddox has argued,

Wesley would have balked at the possible implication that reception of the Holy Spirit is guaranteed through confirmation. More to the point, he rejected the notion that the Gift of the Holy Spirit is somehow reserved for later bestowal upon folk who were already "partly" Christian. If the intention of confirmation is defined instead as simply renewing or deepening one's responsiveness to the Gift of the Spirit, then Wesley would reject the suggestion that this need is met in any single event; the Way of Salvation is a continual process of deeper responsiveness to the Spirit's Presence, empowered by regular participation in the several means of grace.²⁷

Maddox highlights a key theological objection to the rite of confirmation: the possible implication that reception of the Holy Spirit is guaranteed through confirmation. Once again we see running throughout Anglican theology that, when considering the relationship between baptism and confirmation, the role of the Spirit in both is a key theological question. Maddox draws attention to the possibility that Wesley may have removed the rite

²⁵ Susan Willhauck, *John Wesley's View of Children: Foundations for Contemporary Christian Education*, PhD Dissertation, The Catholic University of America, 1992.

²⁶ Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 229.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 227.

of confirmation out of a desire to emphasize personal responsiveness to the gift of the Spirit to be an ongoing activity rather than a single event.

5.4 From Initiation to Ongoing Participation

Wesley removed the rite of confirmation, but he assumed that infant baptism, catechesis, proclamation, and belief would lead toward an awakened desire to flee from wrath and participate fully and robustly in a Spirit-filled community. Ultimately, it is the success of Methodist societies that frees Wesley to disregard confirmation as a secondary “sacramental” bestowal of the Holy Spirit. Albert Outler wrote:

The success of Methodism as a religious society within the Church of England bolstered his sense of freedom to amend Anglican customs without rejecting the Anglican heritage. He quietly ignored the possibility that, in the process of reforming the national church, he was opening a way for his “societies” eventually to “separate” and go it alone as “sects” trying to become “churches” on their own. Over against the Anglican tradition of the church as *corpus mixtum*, Wesley demanded more of his societies, as disciplined communities of true believers. Against the Anglican reliance on church as ministrant of the means of grace, Wesley opposed the doctrine of justification by faith alone (and argued, mistakenly, that this doctrine was novelty in Anglicanism!). To the Anglican tradition of baptismal regeneration he added conversion and “new birth” as a Gospel requisite. To the Anglican contentment with the Prayer book as a complete blueprint, Wesley added a medley of “irregularities”: field preaching, extempore prayer, itinerancy, class meetings and the like. To the Anglican tradition of the “natural” alliance between church and state, he opposed the concept of church as a voluntary association. The effect of such changes was to put the question of authority into a new context: to relate it more nearly to the individual’s conscience, to small group consensus, and also to link it practically with the ideal of “accountable discipleship,” (to use an apt phrase of David Watson’s).²⁸

²⁸ Albert Outler, “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral in Wesley,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, Volume 20, Number 1, Spring, 1985, 11.

Wesley is not oblivious to questions of initiation; it is simply that the center of his focus was not on clarifying questions of Christian initiation (baptism/confirmation). Rather, the burden of his ministry was to motivate and incentivize continued participation in the way of salvation through the means of grace in community. Wesley was convinced that if one awakened to their need for grace, the Methodist movement could usher a person into thick Spirit-filled communal lifelong relationship. His genius was the creation of the Spirit-filled community in the form of societies, classes, and bands where the full battery of means of grace could nourish and guide their further journey on the Way of Salvation. His focus was not on initiation; it was on continuation.

Perhaps, Wesley can also be forgiven for not developing a comprehensive ecclesiological vision for American Methodism. He did not answer every question. The removal of the rite of confirmation has consequences for American Methodism that Wesley simply could not foresee. It is to these developments that I turn next.

Chapter Six. Consequences of Removal

Wesley's removal of the rite of confirmation from the 1784 *Sunday Service* had consequences for American Methodism. Wesley did not set out to start an autonomous Methodist Church in America; he was responding to an urgent pastoral and spiritual need. He felt responsible to make provisions, especially where he viewed the Church of England to be obfuscating its responsibility, to meet the growing sacramental crisis provoked by the American Revolution.

There are several excellent historical and theological studies of the evolution of Christian initiation in American Methodism¹ from its inception in 1784 through the split of the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church South until the 1939 reunification of the MEC, MECS, and the Methodist Protestant Church: Karen Westerfield Tucker's 2001 *American Methodist Worship* has an excellent chapter on "The Rites of Christian Initiation;"² Gayle Carlton Felton's 1992 *This Gift of Water: The Practice and Theology of Baptism Among Methodists in America*;³ Charles R. Hohenstein's 1990 dissertation, "The Revisions of the Rites of Baptism in the Methodist Episcopal Church 1784-1939";⁴ Ole E. Borgen's 1989

¹ A comprehensive study of the initiatory practices in American Methodism, which is beyond the scope of this paper, would include—African Methodist Episcopal Church (1816), AME Zion Church (1821), Methodist Protestant Church (1830), Wesleyan Methodist Connection (1843), Free Methodist Church (1860), Colored (Christian) Methodist Episcopal Church (1870).

² Karen Westerfield Tucker, *American Methodist Worship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), Chapter 4, "The Rites of Christian Initiation."

³ Gayle Carlton Felton *This Gift of Water: The Practice and Theology of Baptism Among Methodists in America* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992).

⁴ Charles R. Hohenstein, *The Revisions of the Rites of Baptism in the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1784-1939*, University of Notre Dame PhD Dissertation, 1990.

articles “Baptism, Confirmation, and Church Membership in the Methodist Church Before the Union of 1968: A Historical and Theological Study, Part I and II;”⁵ and Paul S. Sanders’ 1954 dissertation, “An Appraisal of John Wesley’s Sacramentalism in the Evolution of Early American Methodism.”⁶ Each of these sources has unique emphases, but they all focus on three areas important areas within the development of Wesleyan theology and Methodist practice in America—the practice and theology of baptism, the formation of children, and the relationship between baptism and membership.

6.1 The Practice and Theology of Baptism

One main consequence of Wesley’s decision to remove confirmation from the *Sunday Service* is that American Methodism inherits the rite of baptism as the sole initiation rite. The tensions in American Methodist baptismal theology and practice were rooted in Wesley himself. “Baptism was not, for Wesley, a subject of prime pastoral or doctrinal concern,” wrote Gayle Felton. “Because it was not in the forefront of contemporary theological debate, he treated baptism much less extensively than he did many other issues.”⁷

Wesley does not develop a comprehensive baptismal theology. Scholars focus on many important questions in his writing like Wesley’s views on the mode of baptism, the proper subjects for baptism, the sacramental authority of presbyters, and the validity of non-

⁵ Ole E. Borgen, “Baptism, Confirmation, and Church Membership in the Methodist Church Before the Union of 1968: A Historical and Theological Study” Part I, *Methodist History* 27:2 (January 1989), Part II, *Methodist History* 28:3 (April 1989).

⁶ Paul S. Sanders, *An Appraisal of John Wesley’s Sacramentalism in the Evolution of Early American Methodism*. Union Theological Seminary, ThD Dissertation, 1954.

⁷ Felton, *This Gift of Water*, 15.

episcopal administration of baptism. Crucial to the conversation about initiation in American Methodism is the pivotal dispute among commentators over the question of Wesley's view of baptismal regeneration and new birth.

The *Treatise on Baptism*, written by his father, Samuel, and republished by John, affirmed a belief that baptism accomplished “the washing away of the guilt of original sin.”⁸ The sacrament reverses the effects of the sin of Adam by applying to us the free gift of the merits of Christ's life and death. But, Wesley went further; he also consistently affirmed the doctrine of baptismal regeneration.⁹ Wesley's revision of the twenty-seventh Anglican Article of Religion, “Of Baptism”—Article Seventeen in the *Sunday Service*—kept the phrase that baptism is “also a sign of regeneration, or the new birth.”¹⁰ While Wesley rejected the scholastic doctrine that the sacraments convey grace *ex opere operato*, he maintained a belief in baptismal regeneration and new birth.

However, in his preaching, Wesley's rhetoric takes on a sharper and more evangelical tone. The rhetorical shift was rooted in Wesley's deep concern with post-baptismal sin and desire to motivate real and active faith among adults. In a sermon entitled, “The Marks of the New Birth,” he exhorts,

Say not then in your heart, I *was once* baptized; therefore I *am now* a child of God. Alas, that consequence will by no means hold. How many are the baptized gluttons and drunkards, the baptized liars and common swearers, the baptized railers and

⁸ Wesley, *Treatise on Baptism*, 190.

⁹ This can be seen in the *Treatise on Baptism*, in his *Explanatory Notes*, particularly his commentary on John 3.5, and in a 1756 essay in the form of “An Extract of a Letter to the Reverend Mr. Law,” *Works* (Jackson) 9:466-509, 494.

¹⁰ Westerfield Tucker, “The Rites of Christian Initiation,” 88.

evil-speakers, the baptized whoremongers, thieves, and extortioners!...To say then that ye cannot be born again, that there is no new birth but in baptism, is to seal you all under damnation, to consign you to hell, without any help, without hope.¹¹

This sermon and others like it suggest a growing concern in Wesley's pastoral theology for the need of a more evangelical and subjective "new birth" beyond the sacramental benefits of baptism. Some commentators see an evolution in Wesley's understanding of baptism from an early high sacramental view of baptismal regeneration to a more evangelical and subjective view later in life. Others view the tension or seeming contradictory nature of his views as a matter of emphasis and rhetorical aim. In his treatises, he is attempting to exhort his hearers to live up to their baptisms. In his sermons, Wesley was not attempting to write a comprehensive and systematic sacramental theology. Wesley writes and speaks about two types of regeneration and new birth. Westerfield Tucker provides a helpful summary:

On the matter of infant baptismal regeneration, Wesley never wavered. Infant baptism was effectual and efficacious. But Wesley observed that persons baptized in infancy often appeared later to be children of the devil than children of God—often as soon as the age of reason. To appeal to new birth of one's baptism while living as a wretched sinner was to admit a false assurance of salvation and consign oneself to damnation. Hence, those who had lost the "principle of grace," who lacked the inward witness of the Spirit or had not manifested the Spirit's fruits, needed to be regenerated or "born anew" a second time, not through baptism if they had been validly baptized previously, but by the "circumcision of the heart." A conscious experience of saving grace, also termed by Wesley the "new birth," was necessary to restore the divine image that had been distorted or suppressed...In effect, two new births, one sacramental and objective, and the other experiential and subjective, were necessary for most individuals baptized as infants.

One of the consequences of this tension in Wesley's theology was that a coherent baptismal theology and practice continued to be elusive for Methodists in America. On the

¹¹ Sermon 18, *Works* 1:429.

one hand, American Methodists inherited a high view of the sacrament of baptism. On the other hand, it also inherited a strong evangelical commitment to the making of a personal commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. This created an “unresolved tension” between the reception of sacrament of infant baptism—which Wesley believed was an outward sign of an inward grace signifying and making effectual new birth by water and the spirit—and the subjective faith response by each person.¹² “A tension occurs whenever the church both baptizes infants and expects personal faith of its members,” wrote Westerfield Tucker. “This tension was played out in Wesley’s theology as he strove to hold in tandem both the grace that precedes all human response and the necessity of saving faith confessed and lived out.”¹³

Throughout the history of American Methodism, pastors and scholars sought to maintain or recover the practice infant baptism even if the theological rationale for the practice shifted through time. Westerfield Tucker argued,

Methodist theological positions in these areas would not be crafted solely on the basis of an internal dogmatic framework; rather, Methodist views on baptism developed also in response to external stimuli, such as the baptismal theology and practice of other denominations, the philosophical and political notions of democratic egalitarianism present in American society, and the social, anthropological, and (later) psychological understandings of children and childhood.¹⁴

However, the emphasis often fell on the subjective faith response from individuals. “It didn’t take long for Wesley’s *sacramental* understanding of baptism to disappear in most Methodist

¹² Ibid., 116-117.

¹³ Ibid., 116.

¹⁴ Westerfield Tucker, 98.

circles. The early tension between a regenerating sacrament that incorporates children into the church and the need for a subsequent *profession* of faith shifted toward the second pole.”¹⁵ Subsequently, some American Methodists came to view baptism of infants as a “dedication” by the parents that would only be fulfilled when the one baptized became a “full member” of the church, upon making a personal commitment to Jesus Christ.

When pressed, particularly by Baptists, American Methodism would reaffirm its commitment to the practice of infant baptism, while viewing infant baptism as insufficient in itself. In the absence of a rite of confirmation and the present influence of the Second Great Awakening, American Methodism in the early nineteenth century had a high commitment to adult conversion, personal affirmation, altar calls. There was no ritual whereby to incorporate subjective faith response into the liturgy of the church. Clergy relied on simple response to preaching in a personal conversion experiences.

6.2 The Formation of Children

Today American Methodists tend to conflate the term “confirmation” to mean both a liturgical rite and a process of religious education. One might worry, therefore, that Wesley’s removal of the rite of confirmation meant a rejection of the importance of childhood formation and catechesis.¹⁶ This is absolutely not the case. It is true that the focus of Wesley’s work from the 1740s was primarily the formation of adults in societies, classes,

¹⁵ Osmer, 107.

¹⁶ Maddox, 225.

and bands. However, throughout his ministry, he continued to place an emphasis on the religious education of children.

During his ministry, Wesley preached about and created resources for the cultivation of “family religion.” He started boarding schools—Kingswood School, the best known example, opened in 1748 for the children of the colliers. “The centrality of religious formation to the purpose of these schools is obvious from the opening ceremonies at Kingswood,” wrote Maddox. “John’s sermon was on the text ‘train up a child in the way that he should go,’ while the hymn that Charles composed for the occasion spoke of the hope to ‘unite the pair so long disjoin’d, knowledge and vital piety.’ As John would later instruct a teacher at one of his schools, her task was to “make Christians.”¹⁷ Boarding schools were not a comprehensive solution to the need for religious education. Wesley also produced catechetical materials for the Methodist movement.

In chapter five, we noted that Thomas Cranmer had followed Martin Bucer in requiring instruction in the standard catechism as a prerequisite for receiving the rite of confirmation in the Church of England. Wesley became dissatisfied with the standard catechism in the Prayer Book; eventually, he selected, translated, and revised materials like his *Instructions for Children* which supplemented the theological dimensions of the Prayer Book catechism with moral and ethical materials.¹⁸ The inclusion of moral and ethical material

¹⁷ Ibid., 226.

¹⁸ The first half of this work appears to be loosely dependent upon Claude Fleury’s *Grand Catéchisme historique* (1683). The second half is an abridged translation of Pierre Poiret’s *Les Principes Solides de la Religion et de la Vie Chrétienne, appliqués à l’Education des enfans* (1705). Note Wesley’s favorable

suggested Christian formation for Wesley was not simply increased knowledge; it was also about growth in holiness of heart and life. Wesley's catechism became one of his most popular works and was never absent from his publication lists.¹⁹ This practice was destined not only to spread but to develop beyond simply teaching a catechism into an ongoing weekly process of religious education. Maddox notes that the prototype of Sunday schools is to be found in Methodism.²⁰ Wesley highly valued these Sunday schools, once characterizing them as "nurseries for Christians."²¹

Instructions for Children was used in the initial decades of American Methodism. In 1795 an early American Methodist preacher named John Dickins published *A Short Scriptural Catechism*. In 1826 the American church turned to the new catechisms developed by Richard Watson for the (British) Wesleyan Methodists as an alternative to Wesley's *Instructions for Children*. Then, in 1840 the MEC book concern released a new *Scripture Catechism* by William Creagh. On separating, the MECS carried over use of the Wesleyan Methodist catechisms, but requested Thomas Summers to produce their own *Scripture Catechism*. Meanwhile, the

comparison of this volume to the Anglican catechism in Letter to Mary Bishop (15 Mar. 1777), *Letters* (Telford), 6:258; and his general estimate of it in *A Short Account of the Life and Death of the Rev. John Fletcher* (1786), Chapter VIII, Par. 12, *Works* (Jackson), 11:339.

¹⁹ James E. Kirby, Russell E. Richey, and Kenneth E. Rowe, *The Methodists: Student Edition* (London: Praeger, 1998), 168.

²⁰ The earliest example may be a Sunday class that Hannah Ball started in 1769, mentioned in a letter that she wrote to Wesley on 16 December 1770 (Letters [Telford], 5:218). This would antedate Robert Raines; cf. discussion in Willhauck 1992, pp. 232-4.

²¹ Journal (18 July 1784), Journal (Curnock), 7:3. See also Letter to Richard Rotta (17 Jan. 1787), Letters (Telford), 7:364; Letter to Alexander Suter (24 Nov. 1787), Letters (Telford), 8:23-4; and Letter to Walter Churchey (25 May 1789), Letters (Telford), 8:238.

MEC directed Daniel Kidder to supervise producing a new catechism that integrated scripture instruction, which they adopted in 1852. The MEC also sponsored the production of catechisms for their German-speaking members at home and abroad. In addition to such official works, there were some independent ventures in both the MEC and MECS during the nineteenth century. At the turn of the century the MPC finally issued a native replacement for the Wesleyan Methodist catechism. The MECS soon followed suit, joining forces with the MEC to produce a new shared standard and junior catechism in 1905.

One can see the commitment of American Methodists to the formation of children and youth in faith not only in the proliferation of catechetical materials, but also in writing and preaching of pastors. Freeborn Garrettson posed the situation in his 1826 semi-centennial sermon to the New York Conference:

Can we answer to God for our conduct towards the rising generation? We baptize thousands of little children, and what becomes of them? The primitive ministers and Christians held them as members of Christ's mystical body, saluted them with the church's kiss of peace, gave them the eucharist, and had great patience with their childish inadvertencies, giving them instructions and admonitions, as their tender minds could have hold of Christ in the promises, and actually to feel themselves put into possession of their promised inheritance, by a living, active faith in the Son of God. When any of them proved stubborn and rebellious, refusing to accept their covenanted blessings, the bread that did not prove salutary, was withheld under suspension; or after long forbearance, when necessity compelled, they were excommunicated. Till thus prohibited, as far as they were capable, they were entitled to all the immunities of the Christian church. Our children should be put in classes, and as soon as they are able to receive religious instruction, they should be met weekly by the minister, or some other suitable person appointed for the occasion. I am well satisfied, that if parents, or guardians, and the church generally, were to take due pains in training the rising generation,

instead of running wild, and fashioning themselves after the world as they grow up, their minds would be drawn to God, and most of them would embrace religion.²²

Garretson displays an awareness of the rites of initiation in the early church. He also emphasizes the importance of religious instruction in weekly classes by the minister, or some other suitable person appointed for the occasion. This kind of commitment was written into the 1824 *Discipline* requiring pastors to commit to the work of instructing children in the faith. In 1824, the same year that the American Sunday School Union was established in Philadelphia, the educational requirements of the Methodist Episcopal expanded in 1824, with the organization of classes for children. The General Conference of the MEC commissioned a catechism to be used with children and youth.²³ The requirements expanded again in 1836 when the content of instruction for baptized children was specified to “embrace the nature of experimental religion, but also the nature, design, privileges and obligations of baptism.”²⁴ In 1840, a Committee on Sunday Schools (augmented by a published Methodist curriculum) was formed.

The absence of a rite of confirmation did not signal an abnegation of the responsibility to form children and youth in the faith. While the means of religious education shifted in each generation, American Methodism have always highly valued the formation of

²² Felton, 74-75.

²³ Gregory Van Buskirk, “The Evolution of Methodist Membership Practices as Embedded Methodist Ecclesiology” Boston University, May 2013, p. 13.
https://www.academia.edu/4066649/The_Evolution_of_Methodist_Membership_Practices_as_Embedded_Methodist_Ecclesiology.

²⁴ Westerfield Tucker, 112.

children in faith even if they have struggled to resolve questions about what the relationship of baptized children to the church should be.

6.3 Membership: From Society to Church²⁵

Although the absence of a rite of confirmation does not signal a lack of commitment to the formation of children, it did mean that American Methodism begins without clarity and coherence in what constitutes membership in the church. American Methodism inherits conceptions of membership from Anglican baptismal theology and English supplemental societies. How was one to become a Methodist? “Prior to 1784,” writes Karen Westerfield Tucker, “Methodism’s status as an religious society within the Church of England had necessitated a series of regulations for admission and membership independent of the sacrament of baptism, which was generally assumed to have been received, though was not mandated.”²⁶

John Wesley explicitly stated in the General Rules of the Methodist societies that there was “only one condition previously required in those who desire admission” into those societies, namely, “a desire ‘to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins.’” Membership in Methodist societies was open to anyone who had this desire; however, Wesley believed that “wherever this (desire) is really fixed in the soul, it will be shown by its

²⁵ Rex Matthews, “Church Membership and Pastoral Authority in The United Methodist Church and Its Antecedents,” *Methodist Review*, Vol. 2 (2010), 69-136; Frederick A. Norwood, *Church Membership in the Methodist Tradition* (Nashville: The Methodist Publishing House, 1958); James E. Kirby, Russell E. Richey, and Kenneth E. Rowe, *The Methodists: Student Edition* (London: Praeger, 1998); Gregory P. Van Buskirk, “The Evolution of Methodist Membership Practices as Embedded Methodist Ecclesiology” Boston University, May 2013.

²⁶ Westerfield Tucker, 111.

fruits.” Wesley had high expectations for society members. Members “should *continue* to evidence their desire for salvation” by following the General Rules: (1) “doing no harm, by avoiding evil in every kind”; (2) “doing good, by being, in every kind, merciful after their power”; and (3) “attending upon all the ordinances of God.”²⁷ Wesley had no reluctance about enforcing these rules strictly, and felt quite free to eject ‘disorderly walkers’ from membership in the Methodist societies, even if they had been members for many years, by refusing to renew their class tickets. The numbers on the membership rolls of the Methodist societies were of far less importance to Wesley than the quality of life exhibited by the members.²⁸

There is a big difference between excluding individuals from a voluntary and supplementary Methodist society and excommunicating them from the Church of England. Wesley was not “depriving people from access to the sacraments or the other means of grace, precisely because Methodism was not (yet) a church, but instead a voluntary para-church organization existing alongside of the institutional structures of the Church of

²⁷ “The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies” (1743), in *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984)...

²⁸ Wesley writes in his *Journal* for June 1744, following the first of what would become the annual Conferences of the leaders of the movement: “The following week we endeavored to purge the society (in London) of all that did not walk according to the gospel. By this means we reduced the number of members to less than nineteen hundred. But number is an inconsiderable circumstance. May God increase them in faith and love!” *Works*, Vol. 20 (*Journal and Diaries III*): 34. Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 123-23, 138-39.

England.”²⁹ The purpose of Methodist societies was “not to form any new sect; but to reform the nation, particularly the Church; and to spread scriptural holiness over the land.”³⁰

In describing the early development of Wesley’s Methodist societies, Frank Baker writes that “although it was assumed that the bulk of the members were or would become loyal Anglicans, no creedal or ecclesiastical test was imposed” as a condition of Methodist society membership. What was imposed instead was an “ethical test” of whether or not individuals exhibited a pattern of daily living in accordance with their professed desire for salvation. After the publication of the General Rules in 1743, Baker writes, “applicants were still *admitted* into membership upon a mere profession of ‘a desire to flee from the wrath to come, and be saved from their sins,’ but they could only be *continued* in membership as they proved the sincerity of their professed desire by translating words into deeds.”³¹ The members of the Methodist societies of Wesley’s day were, in the words of Frederick Norwood, in essence *always* “probationary members,” and Wesley expected them all to *remain* “on trial” throughout their lives.³² “Full” membership in Mr. Wesley’s societies was never the same thing as “permanent” membership.

²⁹ Matthews, 72.

³⁰ *Minutes of Several Conversations Between Mr. Wesley and Others from the Year 1744, to the year 1789*. The “Large Minutes.”

³¹ Frank Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970), 78-79.

³² Frederick A. Norwood, *Church Membership in the Methodist Tradition* (Nashville: Methodist Publishing House, 1954), 32-34.

American Methodism receives a dual inheritance—both ecclesial and societal.³³ “The sacramental and the evangelistic were combined in the first official books of the Methodist Episcopal Church: through baptism, an infant or individual of ‘riper years’ was ‘received into Christ’s holy Church’ and ‘made a lively member of the same’; and according to Question 16 in the *Discipline*, membership tickets were to be issued quarterly for regular admission to the ‘society’ only after examination, a two-month trial period (after 1788, probation was set at six months), and ongoing visible and active fulfillment of Christian duties, the neglect of which could bring expulsion.”³⁴ This dual inheritance ensured an abiding ambiguity in American Methodism with regard to church membership.

When the American Methodists met in the “Christmas Conference” of 1784 to establish what they decided to name the Methodism Episcopal Church (MEC), they adopted an edited version of the British “Large Minutes” as the basic template for the polity of the new church.³⁵ The first American Methodist *Discipline* included provisions related to membership, derived from the British “Large Minutes”:

- Q.16. How shall we prevent improper Persons from insinuating into the Society?
A.1. Give Tickets to none till they are recommended by a Leader, with whom they have met at least two Months on Trial.
2. Give Notes to none but those who are recommended by one you know, or until they have met three or four Times in a class.
3. Give them the Rules the first Time they meet.
Q. 17. When shall we admit new Members?

³³ Westerfield Tucker, 111.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 111.

³⁵ Matthews, 75.

A. In large Towns, admit them to the Bands at the quarterly Love-Feast following the Quarterly Meeting: Into the Society, on the Sunday following the Quarterly Meeting. Then also read the names of them that are excluded.

For early American Methodism, the category of membership conceived within the construct of a voluntary society rather than a church.

Qualification for membership in Methodist churches was moral and disciplinary rather than sacramental.³⁶ The Methodist Episcopal Church did not stipulate baptism as a prerequisite for membership. Those who argued against baptism as a prerequisite for membership pointed to the still-binding General Rules of the United Societies stated that there was only one condition for membership: the desire to flee from the wrath to come.³⁷ Instead, the MEC heightened the strictness of societal membership for the sake of fulfilling the mission of Methodism—“to reform the continent, and spread scripture-holiness over these lands.”³⁸ In their explanatory notes to the 1798 *Discipline*, Bishops Coke and Asbury write about the organization of Methodism according to societies so that the “society may be considered as a spiritual hospital, where souls come to be cured of their spiritual diseases.”³⁹ In the very next section, they delineate “our duty to fence in our society.”⁴⁰ Gregory van Buskirk notes that the emphasis is not on *initiation* by the Anglican means of baptism and/or

³⁶ Kirby, Richey, Rowe, *The Methodists*, 167.

³⁷ Westerfield Tucker, 111.

³⁸ 1798 *Discipline*, “To the Members of the Methodist Societies in the United States,” Para. 3, p. 3.

³⁹ 1798 *Discipline*, II, Para. 3, “Notes,” 151-152.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, II, Para. 4, “Notes,” 153-154.

confirmation, but on *continuation* in the society through a vetting process (notes, tickets, character-scrutiny) followed by the expectation of strict adherence to the Rules.⁴¹

Methodism was able to spread in a religious culture marked by the phenomenon of camp meeting and revival baptisms, and with the regular practice of baptizing persons who had not yet experienced saving faith but who were truly penitent. In both cases, individuals were enrolled in a ‘class’ to receive catechesis and nurture until their spiritual maturity warranted ‘full membership.’⁴² Westerfield Tucker writes, “The absence of a baptismal requirement proved practically beneficial for Methodism communities served by unordained preachers, though it contributed to the confusion regarding the connection between baptism, conversion, and membership.”⁴³

The issues that emerge from the ambiguity and confusion regarding membership in the Methodist Episcopal Church were most pronounced with regard to the initiation of children. Again Westerfield Tucker provides a helpful summary of the issues:

During the first half of the nineteenth century, the vigorously defended practice of infant baptism was believed to initiate children into the invisible, catholic Church, but not to grant any formal association with either the denomination or the local church. Methodists generally did not attempt to untangle such an ecclesiastical conundrum (though there were constant calls for clarity, from both internal and external sources), preferring instead simply to juxtapose an affirmation of Christ’s inclusion of children in the new covenant with the expectation that Methodist membership required evidence of vital piety. To motivate children toward personal faith and membership, Methodist preachers were obliged by the 1784 *Discipline* to

⁴¹ Van Buskirk, 11.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 112.

⁴³ Westerfield Tucker, 111.

catechize both baptized and unbaptized children. So guided, those youngsters who were deemed ‘truly awakened’ could be admitted into societal membership.⁴⁴

Wesley may have hoped that the rite of confirmation as a single event would be replaced by the regular and ongoing participation in a society. However, initiatory practices in American Methodism developed in an incoherent direction. Initiating a child through infant baptism into the invisible church and “yet not making him a member of any visible section of that church” as an attempt to preserve the sacrament of infant baptism and the society as a means towards personal faith and vital piety was an ecclesiological absurd position.⁴⁵ It suggested confusion about the various “levels” of membership, of which there are at least four: (1) the Kingdom of God—the largest and most inclusive of the terms; (2) Christ’s universal Church—roughly synonymous with the traditional phrase “the Church militant;” (3) the Methodist Church as a denomination; and (4) the local Methodist congregation.

As Methodism in America evolved throughout the first half of the nineteenth century from a group of voluntary societies existing within the context of a church to being a church,⁴⁶ there were attempts to provide more clarity between the baptized child and the visible church. The 1816 *General Conference*, meeting one month after the death of Francis Asbury, replaced the word “connection” with “church” throughout the *Discipline* and—more importantly—“replace(d) the term *society* with the term *church* in the section of the *Discipline*

⁴⁴ Ibid., 112.

⁴⁵ T.F.R. Mercein, “The Relation of Baptized Infants to the Church,” *Methodist Quarterly Review* 37 (January 1855) 101-102.

⁴⁶ Rex Matthews, “Church Membership and Pastoral Authority in The United Methodist Church and Its Antecedents,” 69.

concerning membership; the term *society* continue(d) as a vestigial usage elsewhere.”⁴⁷ In 1836, the primary question about membership changes from “How shall we prevent improper persons from insinuating themselves into the Society?”⁴⁸ to “How shall we prevent improper persons from insinuating themselves into the Church?” And the answer also changes, to state formally for the first time that baptism is a prerequisite for membership: “Let none be received into the church, until they are recommended by a leader with whom they have met at least six months on trial, *and have been baptized.*”⁴⁹ Rex Matthews writes,

Here in 1836, for the first time in this stream of American Methodism, language that is characteristic of “church” is conjoined with the older language that is characteristic of “society.” Until this point, people were admitted to the Society when class tickets were given to them by the pastor based on the prior recommendation of a class leader with whom the candidates had met during a six month trial period. Now the language shifts dramatically, speaking of members as being “received into the Church,” and making baptism a requirement of reception into the church in addition to recommendation by a class leader.

The 1840 *Discipline* specified that baptized children who were “well disposed may be admitted to our class meetings and love feasts, and such as are truly serious, and manifest a desire to flee from the wrath to come, shall be advised to join society as probationers.”⁵⁰ Felton notes that despite these statements some voices in the church continued to worry about children who had been baptized as infants growing up with a disregard for the obligations of membership in the body of Christ.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Rex Matthews, *Timetables of History*, 65.

⁴⁸ This is the question in the 1785 MEC *Discipline* and the British “Large Minutes.”

⁴⁹ Matthews, 80. MEC *Discipline* 1836, II, Q.3, p.81.

⁵⁰ Felton, 75.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 75.

In 1844, the MEC divided over the issue of slavery and related issues of church polity. When the southern Methodists in America decided to separate from the northern church, they were faced with the challenge of organizing a new church. They replicated the majority of the 1844 *Discipline* with a couple notable exceptions regarding membership. They create a new section of the *Discipline* with the heading “Of the Reception of Membership into the Church” bringing over the questions about “Class Meetings” regarding membership.⁵²

Both the MEC and the MECS attempted to clarify the relationship of baptized children to the church. In 1856 under the heading “Of Baptized Children” (Part I, Ch. 2, Para. 3) offers a more carefully delineated connection between the baptized child and the visible church:

Whenever they shall have attained an age sufficient to understand the obligations of religion, and shall give evidence of a desire to flee from the wrath to come, and to be saved from their sins, their names shall be enrolled in the list of probationers; and if they shall continue to give evidence of a principle and habit of piety, they may be admitted into full membership in our Church, on the recommendation of a leader with whom they have met at least six months in class, by publicly assenting before the Church to the baptismal covenant, and also the usual questions on doctrines and discipline.

The Methodist Episcopal Church, South’s *Discipline* in 1858 introduced a statement that went even further than that of its sister church by suggesting that children were to be considered as probationary members following baptism; following ‘a public profession of faith in Christ’

⁵² MECS *Discipline* 1846, Chapter III, I, pp. 71-72. Cf. MEC *Discipline* 1844, II, pp. 86-87.

and evidence ‘of a sincere and earnest determination’ to live the Christian faith, the candidate would ‘be duly recognized as (a member) of the Church.’⁵³

Many in the denomination were concerned that such changes implied baptismal regeneration. However, there were prominent voices like Thomas O. Summers who responded to the criticism. In an editorial published in the *Methodist Quarterly Review* in 1861, Summers argued for the changes,

As to the change in the Discipline, it amounts simply to this: the old book recognized the initiation of children into the Church by baptism—a principle held, we suppose, by all Pedobaptists—but it did not seem to deal with them as members of the Church after they were admitted, apparently taking for granted that they would at some time or other get out of the Church; whereas, the new book makes provision for their spiritual culture in the Church—that they may be trained up in the way they should go, so that they may never depart from it—so brought up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, that they may never forfeit their standing in the household of faith.⁵⁴

Thomas Summers, a pivotal figure in reshaping the liturgical praxis of American Methodism, saw the issues more clearly than most.⁵⁵ As book editor of the Publishing House of the MECS from 1850 until his death in 1882, Summers was well positioned to help create new liturgical rites and interpret theologically the new reality in which Methodists in America found themselves. He oversaw the majority of publications printed during his tenure. He also supervised all of the denomination’s Sunday School publications. He is a particularly

⁵³ Westerfield Tucker, 113.

⁵⁴ Summers, “Notes and Correspondence,” *MQR* 15 (January 1861): 149.

⁵⁵ Matthew Sigler, “Mediating Tradition, Navigating Culture: Towards a Methodist Paradigm for Liturgical Engagement.” Boston University PhD Dissertation 2015, 22-135.

interesting figure in reshaping the way American Methodists thought about baptism, formation of children, and church membership.

Summers believed that baptism “the door of admission into the Church,”⁵⁶ marked the beginning of a life-long process in which the newly baptized was shaped into the image of the Triune God.⁵⁷ While the baptismal theology of American Methodism during this period was shaped by the influence of Horace Bushnell,⁵⁸ Summers rarely spoke about Christian education. Rather, influenced by his reading of patristic sources, he described the work of formation in Methodist Sunday School as a process of catechesis.⁵⁹ He observes:

The catechetical instructions of the ancients consisted chiefly of expositions of the Lord’s Prayer, the ten commandments, and some creed or confession of faith. They heard the Scriptures read and expounded in the church; but their own peculiar course of instruction was received in buildings set apart for the purpose.⁶⁰

Sigler notes that Summers thought it would be wise for the MECS to “imitate the primitive church more closely in this matter,” though he conflates this pre-baptismal instruction of adult converts with post-baptismal catechesis. Summers concludes: “These *catechumena*, as they were called, corresponded to our Sunday-school rooms as the catechists exercised substantially the functions of our Sunday-school teachers.”

⁵⁶ Summers, *Why I Am a Methodist*, 4.

⁵⁷ Matthew Sigler, “Mediating Tradition, Navigating Culture: Towards a Methodist Paradigm for Liturgical Engagement.” Boston University PhD Dissertation 2015.

⁵⁸ Westerfield Tucker, 103.

⁵⁹ Sigler, 126-127.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 127.

6.4 The Introduction of Membership Rites in the MEC and MECS

In addition to rethinking baptismal theology and the formation of children, the 1860s was a period in which the MEC and the MECS began to rethink the relationship between the baptized and church membership. In 1864, the Methodist Episcopal Church approved a service for reception of probationers called a “Form for Receiving Persons into the Church After Probation.” In 1870, The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, followed by approving new rite called a “Form of the Reception and Recognition of Church Members.” Each rite included an ecclesiastical definition seeking to establish the nature and work of the Church as well as the general and local obligations of its members.⁶¹ The baptismal covenant was ratified and confirmed.

Thomas O. Summers, in his commentary on the 1870 *Ritual*, likened the new membership rites to confirmation.⁶² Summers writes,

(This office) corresponds to the office of confirmation in those Churches which use the rite—only the right-hand of fellowship is given in place of the laying on of hands. The passages usually cited for the laying on of hands in Confirmation (Acts 8.17; Acts 19.6; Hebrews 6.2), have no reference to any such rite: they refer to the miraculous gifts of the Spirit, conferred by the laying on of the apostles’ hands. The title of this office was so rendered that it may comprehend the case of those who were baptized in infancy, whose membership is thus publicly recognized, and the case of those who in riper years enter the Church by baptism.⁶³

At first glance and from a historical perspective, the replacement of hand-laying with another gesture, the right hand of fellowship, seems strange. It is helpful to know that this is not the

⁶¹ Westerfield Tucker, 113.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 113.

⁶³ T.O. Summers, *Commentary on the Ritual of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South*. (Nashville: A.H. Redford, Agent for the M.E. Church, South, 1873) 55-56.

first reference to confirmation in American Methodism. In 1837 Nathan Bangs set out to refute the Protestant Episcopal Church's claim of practicing "scriptural" confirmation.⁶⁴ He worried that confirmation as administered in the Protestant Episcopal Church had a dangerous tendency of pronouncing a person regenerated by the Holy Spirit, and consequently already in a state of salvation. This cut against the grain of Wesleyan discipleship. A perpetual probationary status in Methodist societies was essential to the continual growth in grace towards holiness. Bangs argued that, rightly understood from a scriptural perspective, the administration of baptism and the laying on of hands should not be two separate rites, but one and the same.

Notice that while Summers began by saying that this office "corresponds to the office of confirmation," he was careful to distinguish the membership rite from confirmation, presumably as practiced in the Protestant Episcopal Church, by drawing attention to the replacement of hand-laying with a different gesture—the right-hand of fellowship. He was clearly aware of the arguments against confirmation as unscriptural. Summers argued that the pertinent scriptures typically used to justify confirmation refer instead "to the miraculous gifts of the Spirit" conferred by the apostles.

The 1866 ritual adopted by the MECS was careful to distinguish this new membership rite from the gesture of hand laying. However, in keeping with the argument

⁶⁴ Nathan Bangs, *An Original Church of Christ: Or, A Scriptural Vindication of the Orders and Powers of the Ministry of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 2d ed., rev. (New York: T. Mason and G. Lane 1837), 318-328. Bang's comments on confirmation are negative. He sets out to refute the Protestant Episcopal Church's claim of practicing "scriptural" confirmation.

Bangs made in 1837, the MECS included an optional hand laying as a part of the baptismal rite, to be included with “a suitable invocation, extemporaneous devotions, and the Lord’s Prayer.” Summers supported the rubric for the laying on of hands in infant baptism. He wrote:

The imposition of hands which was generally practiced by the fathers of our church, is left optional with the minister. It is appropriate, being an ancient mode of blessing—that is, praying for the divine blessing upon the subject—and was in use in the early Church after baptism, and continued in use till it was subsequently detached from it, and developed into the rite of confirmation.⁶⁵

Summers was not opposed to a rite which included the liturgical action of hand-laying and which was interpreted theologically as a bestowal of the Holy Spirit; he simply argued that it should be placed within the rite of baptism rather than the rite of confirmation. Matthew Sigler wrote, “Summers’ own baptismal theology emphasized the pneumatological aspect of baptism. He often took as his scriptural foundation for baptism biblical texts in which the Spirit was ‘poured out’ on individuals— i.e. Joel 2:28-29. In Summers’ own words the Spirit was given ‘by affusion’ at Pentecost. It is not surprising, then, that Summers’ considered affusion the preferred mode of baptism.”⁶⁶

6.5 Conclusion

The form for the reception of members remained basically unchanged by the MECS through 1938. Westerfield Tucker wrote, “Even with formal rituals in hand for some of the denominations by the late nineteenth century, the theological and practical

⁶⁵ Ibid., 41.

⁶⁶ Sigler, 106.

interconnections between baptism, conversion, and membership remained unclear.”⁶⁷ The identity of American Methodism as both a church and as a society meant that theologians and practitioners continuously experimented with different theological and practical solutions to the problem of representing in Christian initiation both God’s objective gift of salvation and the subjective human response. No single satisfactory answer was found.

⁶⁷ Westerfield Tucker, 113-114.

Chapter Seven. Reintroduction of the Rite

7.1 From 1860 to 1960

As noted in the previous chapter, the first sign that a rite of confirmation might be reintroduced in American Methodism was as early as the 1860s. The decline of Methodist societies and the split of the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (MECS) necessitated a need to rethink and clarify the relationship between baptized children and church membership. Having inherited a societal conception of membership requiring the profession of human desire, both the MEC and the MECS began from the assumption that baptism alone was not sufficient to establish church membership. Membership rites were created which Thomas O. Summers described as being akin to Anglican confirmation. Categories of probationary and preparatory membership were introduced into the *Discipline* and *Ritual*. Probationary membership was an attempt to maintain a trial period before full membership. Preparatory membership was a category that sought to acknowledge that baptized children were in covenant relationship with God. Preparatory members were under the care and supervision of the church, however they were not yet capable of understanding “the obligations of religion,” nor had they given “the evidence of piety” required in order to be admitted into full membership in the church.

While the unresolved internal tensions between baptism, conversion, and membership were one factor in the reintroduction of a rite of confirmation, another external factor was a growing Methodist awareness of and interest in the ecumenical conversation

about liturgical renewal at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁶⁸ American “Protestants sought to bring their worship services into closer alignment with historic traditions of Christian worship,” writes David Bains, “in order to reposition their churches both theologically and culturally. In turning to liturgical tradition, they opposed the pragmatic evangelicalism that had shaped much of mainline Protestant worship.”⁶⁹ Some scholars argue that at the beginning of the twentieth century, Methodist interest in liturgy seems less to do with historical liturgical forms and more to do with providing for the heightened “aesthetic” expectations of Methodists worshipping in larger cities. As Methodists became more respectable within society, they began to substitute “emotionalism and spontaneity” with a growing emphasis on “enriching worship.”⁷⁰ In urban centers, aesthetic assumptions about what the nature of the gathered community in worship were drawn less from the frontier and more from urban theatre and opera with higher quality production value.⁷¹ There was a felt need for more liturgical forms of worship to meet the needs of “increasingly sophisticated worshippers.”⁷² In the 1920s, they turned to historic liturgies and Gothic architecture, known to them primarily through the Protestant Episcopal Church, in order to

⁶⁸ Karen Westerfield Tucker, “Benedictines and Methodists in Liturgical Renewal Currents and Cross Currents,” *The Asbury Theological Journal*, Fall 1995, Vol. 50. No. 2. 211-222; David Ralph Bains, “The Liturgical Impulse in Mid-Twentieth Century American Mainline Protestantism,” PhD Dissertation, Harvard University, 1999.

⁶⁹ Bains, iii.

⁷⁰ White, *Protestant Worship*, 165. James White develops a typology of American worship. In the early twentieth century “frontier” worship declines and White describes the rise of “aesthetic” worship.

⁷¹ Interview with Taylor Burton-Edwards, March 13, 2019.

⁷² Hohenstein, 178.

reemphasize the transcendence of God and the importance and distinctive nature of the church.⁷³

There was a growing awareness of the initiatory practices of other Protestant denominations. The 1916 membership rites in the MEC utilized the verb “to confirm” (which had never been used before in American Methodism). The minister began by addressing the congregation:

Dearly Beloved, these persons here present before you are baptized children of the Church, who, having arrived at the years of discretion, desire now to confirm the vows of their baptism and enter upon the active duties and the full privileges of membership in the Church of Christ.⁷⁴

After a prayer and reading of the gospel of Luke, the minister continued by addressing the persons seeking admission:

Dearly Beloved, we rejoice in the grace of God in that he has brought you to this place, and by his Spirit has confirmed you in your purpose to serve him and to live in the fellowship of the Church of Christ.⁷⁵

The verb “to confirm” was used, first, to describe the action of the baptized child who desired to take ownership of the vows of their baptism and, second, to describe the action of God through the Holy Spirit who increased the baptized child’s desire to serve God and live in the fellowship of the Church of Christ. Candidates were instructed to kneel for the prayer, but the rubric does not stipulate the action of laying on of hands.

⁷³ Bains, iii.

⁷⁴ 1916 MEC *Discipline* Paragraph 515, p. 398.

⁷⁵ 1916 MEC *Discipline* Paragraph 515, p. 400.

In 1932, the liturgical action of laying on of hands and a prayer of blessing was added in the Methodist Episcopal Church's "The Order for Receiving Persons into the Church."⁷⁶ After the person seeking admission publicly renewed their baptismal vows, confessed their faith, and declared their loyalty to The Methodist Church as members, the ritual read as follows:

Then those to be received shall kneel, and the minister, who may lay his hand upon the head of every one severally, shall say:

N., the Lord defend thee with his heavenly grace and by his Spirit confirm thee in the faith and fellowship of all true disciples of Jesus Christ.

"These words and actions hinted at a rite of confirmation," wrote Karen Westerfield Tucker, "as had the optional laying on of hands in the baptismal rites of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, first recommended in 1866."⁷⁷ It was common in 1930s church literature for the membership rites to be labelled as "confirmation."⁷⁸

7.2 The 1965 Rite of Confirmation

A rite of confirmation was officially reintroduced as a ritual in The Methodist Church in the 1965 *Book of Worship for Church and Home*. The General Conference of 1956 established a Commission on Worship under the leadership of Bishop Edwin E. Voigt as chairman and Dr. Paul Burt as secretary to explore a process of liturgical revision, a process common to most Protestant denominations at the time. Authorized by the 1964 General Conference and published in 1965, *The Book of Worship for Church and Home* was the

⁷⁶ This Order is included in the 1945 *Book of Worship for Church and Home*.

⁷⁷ Westerfield Tucker, 115.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 115.

culmination of eight years of work. It was preceded in 1960 by *Proposed Revisions for The Book of Worship for Church and Home: For Trial Use 1960-1964 As Authorized by the 1960 General Conference of The Methodist Church*. “The Order of Confirmation and Reception into the Church” replaced four different rites in the 1945 *Book of Worship*—“The Order for Receiving Persons as Preparatory Members,” “The Order for Receiving Persons into the Church,” “The Order for Receiving Children and Youth into the Church,” and “The Order for Receiving Members by Transfer, or on Affirmation of Faith, or in Affiliated Membership.”

The Commission was operating with an awareness of the larger ecumenical conversation about liturgical renewal. They desired to create a rite that met “the criticism often made of The Methodist Church that its ritual for receiving members into the church is parochial, and not in keeping with the practice of the ecumenical church.”⁷⁹ Internally, the Commission desired to clarify the ambiguities that American Methodism received regarding what constitutes membership by its dual inheritance as a society and as a church. This conception sought to resolve the ambiguity between two conceptions of membership in American Methodism by placing the emphasis on the sacrament of baptism rather than societal membership. The Commission assumed a reading of Methodist history:

Early Methodism began as the United Society, first in Europe, and then in America. Methodists were received into a society defined in the General Rules as “a company of men having the form and seeking the power of godliness, united in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they might help each other to work out their salvation.” This was the

⁷⁹ *Proposed Revisions for The Book of Worship for Church and Home: For Trial Use 1960-1964 As Authorized by the 1960 General Conference of The Methodist Church* (Nashville: The Methodist Publishing House, 1960), 26

distinguishing mark of the Church for John Wesley. Gradually over the years, Methodism has developed from a society into a church. In the revision of the ritual, the Commission on Worship has kept in mind that Methodism is no longer a society but a church, while retaining Wesley's concept of a church as "a fellowship of faithful men."⁸⁰

What had been the role of the members of the Methodist society to "watch over one another in love," now became, in the vision proposed by the Commission, the role of the worshipping congregation who agree in the rite "to surround the new members with an atmosphere of faith, love, and mutual helpfulness in order that they may be strengthened in faith and grow in grace."

The Commission introduced the rite of confirmation by describing a Methodist "doctrine of the church." The church is "a congregation of faithful men receiving and witnessing to the Holy Spirit." The adoption of "The Order of Confirmation and Reception into the Church" sought to restore the sacrament of baptism "to its traditional meaning as a sign and seal of inclusion in Christ's holy Church." This suggested that the Commission was worried about the denigration of baptism as having less than sacramental status in American Methodism. The description included the provocative language "a sign and seal of inclusion" which evoked the traditional language in rites of Christian initiation which would include "a seal of the Holy Spirit." They placed such a seal within the baptismal covenant.

⁸⁰ *Proposed Revisions*, 26.

7.3 Confirmation as Human Profession

The Commission intended a rite which would represent the “historic” office of confirmation, with “historic” defined as the rite separate from baptism that began to emerge in the western church in the fifth century, and that was practiced as baptismal reaffirmation and the culmination of concentrated catechesis by continental Protestants.⁸¹ The Order of Confirmation was defined as a renewal of baptismal vows and an active assumption of membership’s responsibility. In the rite, a person “simply confirms the vows taken at the time of his baptism, on his own initiative, accepts the privileges and assumes the responsibilities involved in church membership.”⁸²

The Order stated that “all who are to be confirmed as members of Christ’s holy church shall have been baptized and instructed in the doctrines and duties of the Christian faith.” This assumes not only a restored rite of confirmation but also a requisite period of instruction. The Order began with a renewal of the vows of baptism:

Dost thou here in the presence of God and of the congregation renew the solemn promise and vow that was made at your baptism?

I do.

Dost thou receive and profess the Christian faith as contained in the New Testament of our Lord Jesus Christ?

I do.

⁸¹ Westerfield Tucker, 115.

⁸² *Proposed Revisions*, 26.

Wilt thou be loyal to Christ's holy Church, uphold it by your prayers, your attendance, your gifts, and your service, and endeavor to promote the welfare of your brethren and the advancement of Christ's kingdom?

I will.

Then the minister shall say:

Let us pray. Almighty and Eternal God, strengthen these thy servants, we beseech thee, with thy Holy Spirit. Daily increase in them the manifold gifts of thy grace. Endue them with true Christlikeness. May their love toward all men abound. Keep them in thy mercy unto life eternal, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Notably, the Order does not require episcopal administration. The task of confirmation is given to the minister/presbyter. The Order required neither an anointing with oil nor a consignation; it is administered by a presbyterial laying on of hands and a prayer:

Then the candidates shall kneel, and the minister, laying his hands upon the head of everyone, severally, shall say:

Confirm, O Lord, this thy child with thy heavenly grace; that *he* may continue thine forever; and daily increase in thy holy Spirit more and more, until *he* comes unto thy everlasting kingdom. Amen.

The proposed changes continued to be revised until 1964, when they were adopted by General Conference and incorporated into the 1965 *Book of Worship for Church and Home*. The final revision reflects a desire for ritual minimalism and plain speech.

This was a *professional* understanding of confirmation.⁸³ Its purpose was to clarify the importance of baptism and resolve the tension between competing conceptions of membership in American Methodism. Here membership was conferred in baptism and reaffirmed in confirmation on the basis of a young persons' instruction in the doctrines and

⁸³ Osmer, 109.

duties of the Christian faith and their readiness “to profess publicly the faith into which they were baptized.”⁸⁴ Osmer writes, “The adoption of this *professional* understanding of confirmation, in conjunction with a *sacramental* understanding of baptism, has remained the sole focus of confirmation in the Methodist Church to the present.”⁸⁵ Westerfield Tucker writes, “Profession and membership (human work) were the rite’s primary purpose. Only secondarily was it conceived as an imbuing of the candidate with the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands (divine action)—the function of the earlier post-baptismal acts from which ‘confirmation’ developed.”⁸⁶

7.4 Evolution of the Rite of Confirmation in the UMC 1968-1988⁸⁷

In 1968, the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren joined together to form the United Methodist Church (UMC). The process of unification required ongoing liturgical revision and the task again fell to the Commission on Worship. The 1972 General Conference merged the Commission on Worship with other agencies to form the General Board of Discipleship. At the beginning of its organization, the General Board of Discipleship established the Section on Worship to oversee research and development of

⁸⁴ *Discipline 1964*, paragraph 1714.

⁸⁵ Osmer, 109.

⁸⁶ Westerfield Tucker, 115.

⁸⁷ Robert Brian Peiffer, *How contemporary liturgies evolve: The revision of United Methodist liturgical texts: (1968-1988)* PhD. Dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 1993. This study, based on primary source material and seventeen oral history interviews with all of the key figures in the process, is the best secondary source for the period.

worship and music resources for the denomination.⁸⁸ Led by Hoyt Hickman, the Section on Worship did not view its task as merely integrating the liturgies of the EUB and the MC; rather, those who revised *how* United Methodists worshiped hoped as well to reform *what* United Methodists believed. They were intoxicated by the hopeful spirit of ecumenism and ultimately intended nothing less than the renewal of the denomination by means of a renewal of liturgy. Over the course of fifteen years the Section on Worship oversaw the production of a series of Supplemental Worship Resources.

A Task Force on Baptism and Confirmation, to be directed by Laurence Stookey, was authorized by the Area on Worship at its meeting in June, 1973.⁸⁹ Stookey was Professor of Preaching and Worship at Wesley Theological Seminary. Additionally, Stookey had participated in the national Lutheran-United Methodist Bilateral Consultation on baptism,

⁸⁸ Peiffer notes that the committee recognized the forces all around that were exerting influence upon the church's worship and music: Vatican II, Civil Rights, Vietnam War and anti-war protests, the youth rebellion, feminism, the rise of the electronic church, the impact of multicultural and global music, modernization of liturgical and worship language, secular influences on the church, and more. In a reorganization of Discipleship Ministries in 1992, the Section on Worship was formally discontinued. Recognizing the publication of the 1989 hymnal and 1992 worship book as the major culminating achievements of two decades of work, the Discipleship Ministries reorganized its staff for work and ministry. The Section on Worship went out of existence in 1992, and Discipleship Ministries staff were reorganized in the major areas of worship/liturgy, preaching, and music. This has resulted in three Discipleship Ministries staff positions since that reorganization.

⁸⁹ Peiffer, 79. It is helpful to be aware of the degree to which Protestants were drawn up into a larger movement and ecumenical conversation. New baptismal services had been recently prepared by other denominations, including the Episcopalians, the Lutherans, the Presbyterians, and the Roman Catholics. New rites included—The Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship, *The Liturgy of Holy Baptism*, 1970; The Joint Committee on Worship for the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, *The Presbyterian Church in the United States, The United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, The Sacrament of Baptism, The Commissioning of Baptized Members* 1970; The Protestant Episcopal Church in the USA, *Holy Baptism with the Laying on of Hands*, 1970; The Roman Catholic Church “*The Rite of Baptism for Children*” and “*The Rite of Confirmation, Ordination, and the Blessing of Oils*” 1969; The United Church of Canada, *Services of Initiation*, 1969; The United Church of Christ, *Orders for Baptism and Confirmation*, 1969.

the 1979 international consultation of Baptists and non-Baptists sponsored by the Faith and Order Section of the World Council of Churches, and the team that drafted a formal UMC response to the World Council document, *One Baptism, One Eucharist, and a Mutually Recognized Ministry*. He was to be the principal author of the revised 1976 alternate text on baptism, confirmation, and renewal.

Several additional members served on the Task Force, including Richard Collman (a pastor from Minnesota), Chester Custer (a staff member of the Board of Discipleship), Lawrence Wagley (a pastor from Illinois) and Hoyt Hickman. One of Hoyt Hickman's goals was the preparation of a new, alternate service of baptism and confirmation, one which reflected "a comprehensive theology of Christian initiation."⁹⁰ Hickman had some initial prejudices about the work of the Task Force from his participation in the work of the Consultation on Church Union (COCU) Worship Commission. He wrote,

The COCU Order reflects a widespread ecumenical movement to restore to baptism the general pattern of a unified service of Christian initiation, and I come to our task force with an initial desire to see this general pattern in any new service of baptism we develop...The laying on of hands and the invocation and recognition of the Holy Spirit immediately following the act of baptism would add greatly to the meaning and power of baptism...Nothing in any new service should suggest to United Methodists that children are only partly initiated into Christ's holy Church until such time as confirmation or "joining the church" completes the sacrament."⁹¹

Others on the task force disagreed. Richard Collman responded to Hickman:

My feeling at least now is that confirmation should be what it always has been historically—voluntary for those who desire it. In other words, I would like to see

⁹⁰ Ibid., 80.

⁹¹ Peiffer, 85. Peiffer was quoting a letter from Hickman to members of the Baptism and Confirmation Task Force, 4 October 1973.

the church at large but perhaps specifically the United Methodist Church, provide a program of catechism or confirmation for those who desire it at whatever age they feel ready.⁹²

It was Laurence Stookey, however, who drove the process. He solicited procedural suggestions from James White, who had been commissioned by the Section on Worship to draft an order for the sacrament of Holy Communion only a few years earlier. White encouraged Stookey and the Task Force to combine the process of baptism and confirmation into a unified whole, in keeping with the best practices across the Episcopalian and Lutheran churches. White acknowledged that to most people “it sounded very weird to think that you could confirm a baby.”⁹³

The disagreement between Hickman and Collman reemerged in the Task Force as a disagreement between Lawrence Stookey and Chet Custer. Stookey had become interested while in the doctoral program at Princeton in the historical questions regarding the ancient development of the rite and the implications that might have for the contemporary church. Custer was a staff member of the Board of Discipleship who had conducted confirmation workshops for the former Board of Evangelism prior to 1972. That some of Custer’s positions were at odds with those which Stookey held was apparent to Hickman. Peiffer wrote,

Because of his heavy investment in confirmation instruction, it was plain from the very beginning that Chet (Custer) was the person who was going to have the most trouble being brought on board. He was in a sense the conservative who, not very successfully, tried to modify some of (Stookey’s) more angular positions. He simply

⁹² Ibid., 85.

⁹³ Ibid., 82.

wanted to preserve confirmation. And who could blame him? He had been so very invested in selling confirmation to churches across the country in workshops.⁹⁴

The Task Force was directed to prepare initial position papers by March 1974 for circulation throughout the denomination and to specialists from other denominations. From such position papers more specific resources then were to be developed, including “model services on Sunday Worship—both with and without the Lord’s Supper—Baptism and Confirmation, Marriage, and the Funeral.” In 1976, *A Service of Baptism, Confirmation, and Renewal* was published. This material was used on a trial basis and was revised until its publication, along with other services, in a 1980 resource called *We Gather Together*. After further revision, these services were adopted by the 1984 General Conference and published as *The Book of Services*, in 1985. Further revision took place in 1988. The final form of the rites was published in the 1989 *United Methodist Hymnal* and the 1992 *Book of Worship*.

What distinguished the revisionary work of the 1970s to the 1990s from the revisionary process of 1956 to 1964 was the goal. The goal of the second process was a recovery of a unified sacramental initiation rite—water bath, invocation of the Holy Spirit and laying on of hands (“confirmation”), and first Communion, using fourth century models. “Following the design of earliest Christian praxis and the continuing custom of the Orthodox, the intention was to complete Christian initiation for children and adults in one event,” wrote Westerfield Tucker.⁹⁵ However, from the very beginning, American Methodism was plagued by its dual inheritance of two conceptions of initiation, one a

⁹⁴ Ibid., 89.

⁹⁵ Westerfield Tucker, 115.

sacramental reception of divine grace at baptism and the other a profession of personal faith or desire to flee from the wrath to come.

7.5 Description of the Rite

The 1989 *United Methodist Hymnal* included four Baptismal Covenants. Baptismal Covenant I, II, and IV demonstrate a movement in American Methodism toward recovery of the theology and practice of the early church and the rich imagery of the Old and New Testament. Baptismal Covenant III, a reworking of the rituals of the former Methodist and former Evangelical United Brethren churches, was written in great haste during a meeting of the 1988 General Conference.⁹⁶ For simplicity, I will focus on The Baptismal Covenant I.

The order of The Baptismal Covenant I is as follows:

- 1) Introduction to Baptism
- 2) Introduction to Confirmation and Reaffirmation
- 3) Presentation of Candidates
- 4) Renunciation of Sin and Profession of Faith
- 5) Parents' and Sponsors' Vow to Nurture the Child
- 6) Vows by Candidates Able to Speak for Themselves
- 7) Vows by Sponsors of Candidates
- 8) Congregation's Vows
- 9) The Apostles' Creed
- 10) Thanksgiving over the Water
- 11) Baptism with Laying on of Hands
- 12) Confirmation or Reaffirmation of Faith
- 13) Congregational Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant
- 14) Reception into The United Methodist Church
- 15) Reception into the Local Congregation
- 16) Commendation and Welcome

⁹⁶ Felton, 165.

Notice that there is a single rite provided for Holy Baptism, Confirmation, Reaffirmation of Faith, Reception into the United Methodist Church, and Reception into a Local Congregation. The introduction to the rite includes this description of confirmation: “Those baptized before they are old enough to take the vows for themselves make their personal profession of faith in the service called confirmation. Those who are able to take the vows for themselves at their baptism are not confirmed, for they have made their public profession of faith at the font.”⁹⁷ The introduction to confirmation states, “Through confirmation, and through the reaffirmation of faith, we renew the covenant declared at our baptism, acknowledge what God doing for us, and affirm our commitment to Christ’s holy Church.” Notice these descriptions place the emphasis on human agency rather than divine action. The form of confirmation is a reaffirmation of the baptismal covenant. It moves through 4) Renunciation of Sin and Profession of Faith, 9) The Apostles' Creed, 10) Thanksgiving over the Water. Then, it states:

As the pastor, and others if desired, place hands on the head of each person being confirmed or reaffirming faith, the pastor says to each:

*Name, the Holy Spirit work within you, that having been born through water and the Spirit, you may live as a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ.*⁹⁸

Theological Interpretation of the Rite of Baptism and Confirmation

The 1989 *United Methodist Hymnal* and the 1992 *Book of Worship* solidified the covenantal theological understanding of baptism and confirmation as normative. In fact, the

⁹⁷ *United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 32.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

rite itself was renamed as The Baptismal Covenant. The Section on Worship provided resources for theological interpretation of the new initiation rites including a *Companion to the Book of Services*, an accompanying document meant to flesh out the theological rationale for the liturgical revisions. It stated:

Baptism points to God's active grace on our behalf and its application to the one baptized. But it also points to our "active response to God"...Baptism, therefore, is a covenant. In the biblical tradition, God binds himself to his people through a covenant promise; those who are bound to God respond by promising to be faithful...Baptism is not a contract that God negotiates with each person separately...It is an affirmation of what God has done for all of us in Jesus Christ.⁹⁹

This covenantal theology gives the Commission the resources to describe confirmation as:

1. God's confirmation of the divine promise made at baptism, when the confirmands were too young to understand it;
2. the confirmands' confirmation of their personal commitment to the baptismal commitment in a public testimony; and
3. the congregation's confirmation of the commitment it made at baptism to nurture the one now being confirmed.¹⁰⁰

While the Commission desired to draw attention to God's work in confirmation, these descriptions in the rite itself place the emphasis on human agency rather than divine action.

Richard Osmer offers a succinct interpretation:

This understanding of confirmation (in the 1989 *United Methodist Hymnal*) rules out three things. First, there is no association of this rite with the bestowal of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, the new baptismal service explicitly includes the laying on of hands after the water-washing, to make it clear that the Spirit should be closely linked to the primary rite of initiation and not something added at a later point. Second, it

⁹⁹ *Companion to the Book of Services: Introduction, Commentary, and Instructions for Using the New United Methodist Services, Supplemental Worship Resources 17* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988).

¹⁰⁰ *Companion*, 81.

eliminates the need for adults to be confirmed. Adults are not first baptized and then confirmed. Confirmation only makes sense in relation to the baptism of infants. Third, it rules out the idea that the baptismal covenant is reaffirmed only once in a person's life. If salvation is a process that must be worked out over the course of a person's entire life, confirmation is an important moment in this process, but not an exclusive one. Individuals and congregations may reaffirm their baptismal covenant on numerous occasions. Indeed, they should do so every time the congregation baptizes one of its members. These new baptismal and confirmation services add a strong covenantal framework to the earlier understanding. The covenantal theology was used to clarify the relationship between baptism and confirmation. Confirmation takes up and reaffirms a reality already given in baptism.¹⁰¹

Hoyt Hickman and James F. White encouraged Stookey to write a book describing the theology of baptism which undergirded the liturgical revisions. Stookey published *Baptism: Christ's Act in the Church* in 1982. The work is not just a theological rationale for the liturgical choices made by the Task Force on Baptism and Confirmation; it is a constructive theology of initiation and represents the most mature theology of initiation undertaken by a Methodist liturgical scholar in the late twentieth century.

The fundamental assumption for Stookey was that "baptism is God's gift to the church, Christ's act within the church."¹⁰² "God shows us our identity," writes Stookey, "by presenting us with the experience of covenant. A covenant initiates a relationship between one who makes a promise (often someone of superiority or authority) and those to whom the promise is given."¹⁰³ Emphasizing the Old Testament covenants that come to fulfillment in Jesus Christ, Stookey emphasizes that covenant-making was often accompanied by a sign

¹⁰¹ Osmer, 110.

¹⁰² Stookey, 12.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 14.

given to aid the remembrance of the divine promise. “Baptism is itself a covenant God initiates with us; the water is the sign given to us to help us remember the promise of the Lord, and to remind us of our identity as a responsible people.”¹⁰⁴ Stookey is at pains to emphasize that baptism is a sacrament, not merely a human subjective experience, but an objective act bound up with the faithful promise of God.¹⁰⁵ The church is “covenant community” challenged “to respond to Christ’s act in our baptism.”¹⁰⁶

Because Stookey conceived of baptism as God’s covenant with us, to which we respond, he placed a high value on the necessity of baptismal covenant renewal. It is in this area that he engaged the conversation about confirmation. The renewal of baptism vows has been explicit in most Protestant theologies of confirmation. In confirmation, the promise of God is confirmed to believers; believers in turn confirm their covenant with God by giving public testimony to their faith.

Stookey sees two problems inherent in thinking about confirmation as a form of baptismal renewal.¹⁰⁷ First, confirmation as covenant renewal is a reinterpretation of the meaning attached to the laying on of hands and associated rites in the early centuries of the church. “Only when this imposition of hands became detached from baptism itself by an extended period of time could confirmation take on the character of an act of renewal.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 15.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 26.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 33.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 76.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 76.

Second, confirmation as a sacrament was generally practiced as an unrepeatable rite which does not adequately reflect the need for continual renewal.

Stookey considered the nature of confirmation within the larger ecumenical reexamination of baptism and widespread reform across denominations. He notes the rise across traditions in the liturgical renewal of baptism stemming from the restoration of the Easter vigil in Catholicism. To do justice to the theology of baptism as covenant, he assumes, there needs to be a regular form of renewal that is clearly related to the sacrament of baptism and repeatable. Across denominations, Stookey recognized a pattern of moving from associating liturgical renewal of baptism with confirmation alone to a repeated liturgical renewal, in order to reflect the daily renewal of the covenant baptism implies.¹⁰⁹ For Stookey, the proper place to situate confirmation was in the conversation about renewal of the baptismal covenant, yet the introduction of a repeated liturgical renewal displaced the central importance of a rite of confirmation conceived as baptismal renewal.

On the one hand, Stookey seemed to propose retaining confirmation as a life-cycle ritual. He suggested an analogy drawn from everyday life that may be helpful—the annual birthday celebration that marks gratitude for daily life. We attach a heightened importance to certain birthdays, Stookey argues, because they signal a heightened awareness of responsibility and maturity. Take a sixteenth birthday, for instance, which marks eligibility for a driver’s license. “The conscious renewal of the baptismal covenant at puberty is intended to mark the beginning of an awareness about, and commitment to, continual

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 77.

renewal, just as a particular birthday reminds the teenager of the continuing privileges and responsibilities of adulthood.”¹¹⁰ Thus, Stookey situated confirmation as conceived by Protestants as a life-cycle rite.

On the other hand, Stookey clearly desired to end confirmation as a professional rite at the onset of adolescence and return to confirmation as a sacramental bestowal of the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands immediately following the water-washing in the baptismal rite. He dances around the term “confirmation” preferring to call the instruction preceding a first affirmation of the baptismal covenant “pre-affirmation” teaching. He wrote,

Thus far, we have avoided calling the affirmation process confirmation. There are several reasons. A good case can be made for equating the term *confirmation* with the act of chrismation of baptism; in the previous chapter we noted the confusion that resulted from the separation of these two aspects of the ancient baptismal liturgy. But because Protestants, in particular, have so closely linked what we call confirmation with the process of education for adult discipleship, the restoration of baptism-confirmation as a single rite can be misunderstood to mean that later conscious commitment by those baptized in infancy is no longer required or expected. This is certainly not the case; therefore, it is desirable that the later process be given a designation (such as “affirmation of the baptismal covenant”) that clarifies its relation to the sacrament of baptism.¹¹¹

Stookey was aware of the complexities involved in reinterpreting the rite, and ultimately concedes the desire for ritual coherence and clarity for a pragmatic realism that often accompanies the messy attempt to exercise faithful pastoral ministry on the ground. He grants:

It is only realistic, however, to recognize that in some denominations and congregations the term *confirmation* will continue to be used for the renewal process.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 78.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 144.

Then care should be taken to give a broader definition than has generally existed. Confirmation is to be understood as more than a series of catechism classes, but as less than an independent sacrament that “completes,” or even overshadows, baptism. Further, confirmation is more than a religious way of recognizing the cultural reality attached to puberty, but less than a mandatory rite of passage into Christian maturity at a specific age level.¹¹²

Two things are at stake for Stookey in the conversation. First, he wants to preserve the primacy of baptism and also eliminate confusion about whether or not baptism in itself requires some additional step to be completed. Second, he desires the Church to communicate that the Christian life is to be an ongoing renewal and commitment, a taking up of the cross daily.

7.6 Conclusion

After you have done the research, sought out the “best practices,” grasped the current sociological landscape, and considered the pertinent historical and theological sources—patristic, scholastic, reformed, Wesley himself, Methodist pastors, liturgical historians, and theologians—you still have to go to the church and figure out what to do with those children whom God has entrusted to your care. Those children whom God has entrusted to your care need to be initiated into Christ’s holy church and incorporated into God’s mighty acts of salvation. The question hasn’t left us. It still remains in all its urgency: How should we approach confirmation now?

¹¹² Ibid., 144.

Conclusion

This study has described the development of rite of confirmation in American Methodism from Wesley's removal of the rite in the 1784 *Sunday Service* to its reintroduction in the 1965 *Book of Worship* and subsequent revision in the 1989 *Hymnal* and 1992 *Book of Worship*. The study has sought to understand the distinctive problems and possibilities emerging from Wesleyan theology and Methodist history that inform our engagement in the broader Protestant conversation about rites of initiation and the formation of children and youth. The lack of a focused study on the rite of confirmation in American Methodism marks a significant gap in Wesleyan theological and liturgical studies. This study offers an initial contribution to the conversation.

The history of confirmation in the West is messy and ambiguous. The ambiguity stems in part from a tension between the objective and sacramental action of God and the subjective and experiential human response. The medieval Catholic Church conceived of confirmation as a sacrament, the objective action of God, associated with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit which confirmed and strengthened baptismal grace. The Protestant Reformers, especially Martin Bucer, reinterpreted confirmation as a rite of human action, a personal profession of faith, a ratification of the baptismal covenant. This tension between sacramental and professional interpretations can be followed through Anglican theologies of confirmation. One can also trace the unresolved tension in Wesley's thought and the initiatory practices of American Methodism between the reception of infant baptism—which Wesley believed was an outward sign of an inward grace signifying and making effectual new

birth by water and the Spirit—and the subjective faith response by each person. Wesley continually affirmed baptismal regeneration. But, he also argued that objective and sacramental regeneration at baptism must be accompanied by an inward and spiritual regeneration, a conversion or new birth, by which a person is awakened to his or her ongoing need for grace. Wesley sought to resolve the tension between divine and human action by supplementing the ordinary Anglican sacramental practice with ongoing participation in societies, classes, and band meetings.

This study argues that Wesley was not oblivious to questions of *initiation*. However, the removal of a rite of confirmation suggests that Wesley was less interested in a single ritual event in which one received a bestowal of the Holy Spirit or made a one-time profession of faith. The burden of his ministry was to create thick communities of discipleship formation and to motivate and incentivize *continued participation* in the way of salvation through the means of grace in Spirit-filled community.

In this chapter, I will sketch out the immediate implications of this study for practitioners, some preliminary thoughts about the future of initiation in American Methodism, and two areas worthy of future research.

8.1 Implications for Pastors and Local Churches

This study has sought to provide more clarity about the end, that is, the aim, of confirmation as both a liturgical rite and as a process of discipleship formation. Pastors should have confidence in the Baptismal Covenant I, II, and IV in the 1989 *Hymnal* and 1992 *Book of Worship*. These rites utilize the biblical category of covenant which allows the

church to name God's action in making covenant with us in baptism while leaving room for human response. If salvation is a process that must be worked out over the course of a person's entire life, the current rite allows for a first affirmation of the covenant in confirmation, but also opportunities for repeated reaffirmation of one's baptismal covenant for the rest of one's life.

At the level of ritual practice, the question becomes where to place the invocation of the Holy Spirit and the gesture of laying on hands—during the sacrament of baptism or later during confirmation. Baptismal Covenant I in the *United Methodist Hymnal* includes the invocation of the Holy Spirit and the gesture of laying on hands at both baptism and confirmation. This study has shown that there are multiple faithful forms of initiation in scripture and tradition. The question is which choice creates a greater degree of theological and ritual coherence in structure of initiation for Methodists moving forward.

8.2 Adolescent Confirmation

A pastoral and pragmatic approach would (1) recognize the need to counteract the tendency of adolescents to adopt cultural (and sometimes unhealthy) rites of passage with more theologically, socially, and psychologically healthy rituals of initiation at the onset of adolescence; (2) make good use of current practices seeking to understand and teach the covenantal theology undergirding the rite as it is written into the 1992 *Book of Worship*, in which confirmation takes up and reaffirms a reality already given in baptism; (3) seek to practice greater care with language, being careful not to conflate confirmation as a liturgical rite with a catechetical process (e.g., stop calling the classes “confirmation” classes. Call the

process leading up to the rite of confirmation something else, like a “preparatory” class); (4) continue producing catechetical materials which offer theologically robust teaching and a compelling moral vision worthy of one’s entire life; (5) focus more energy on reclaiming the early Methodist commitment to ongoing communal Christian formation than crafting a single discipleship process or event; (6) equip adolescents to make a first profession of faith publicly; (7) provide regular opportunities for the renewal of the baptismal covenant; and (8) seek to cultivate an intergenerational community of faith with a distinctive way of life involving definite ethical and creedal commitments into which youth are incorporated through time.

This approach follows Laurence Stookey’s lead, as previously offered in this paper, in conceptualizing the rite of confirmation as analogous to the annual birthday celebration that marks gratitude for daily life. We attach a heightened importance to certain birthdays, Stookey argues, because they signal a heightened awareness of responsibility and maturity such as a sixteenth birthday, for instance, which marks eligibility for a driver’s license. “The conscious renewal of the baptismal covenant at puberty is intended to mark the beginning of an awareness about, and commitment to, continual renewal, just as a particular birthday reminds the teenager of the continuing privileges and responsibilities of adulthood.”¹¹³

In my work at Oxford-University United Methodist Church in Oxford, Mississippi, we have continued this approach to confirmation with some minor adjustments. We have moved confirmation from sixth to seventh grade in order to integrate the catechetical

¹¹³ Ibid., 78.

process into an existing, ongoing communal form of discipleship, the youth group experience. In teaching, we continue to emphasize the broad arc of salvation history recorded in the Bible and doctrine, but we have increased our focus on the baptismal covenant itself and the way of salvation. We are trying to be more careful in our language to distinguish the rite of confirmation from the preparatory process. We have sought to communicate more clearly that confirmation is not an end in itself. As The Confirmation Project research team put it, confirmation “fulfills its faith-forming potential most effectively when it is approached not as a program with requirements to tick off but as a process of formation that is connected in multiple ways to the broader congregation’s relationships, practices, traditions, and experiences.”¹¹⁴ Confirmation is best understood “as part of an ecology, a collaboration of many systems—families, congregational relationships, educational curricula, worship, camps, and conferences—that are all focused toward one end: the formation of disciples.”¹¹⁵

8.3 Infant “Confirmation” (or a Unified Rite of Initiation)

The evidence in this thesis suggests another possibility. I have come to believe that Wesley made the right call; as we craft theologies and practices of initiation, American Methodists should seriously consider ending confirmation as we currently practice it, as a professional rite at the onset of adolescence. This is not to say that a program of religious education aimed at the intensification and first profession of faith and the integration of

¹¹⁴ Osmer and Douglass, *Cultivating Teen Faith*, 2.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

children and youth into the full life of the Church is not appropriate at the onset of adolescence; I am just not convinced that this should be called “confirmation.”

Again, at the level of ritual practice, the question is where to place the invocation of the Holy Spirit and the gesture of laying on hands—during the sacrament of baptism or later during confirmation. Historically, “confirmation” is associated with the biblical practice of laying on of hands and the reception of the Holy Spirit. I am convinced both on historical and theological grounds that the most coherent placement is during the sacrament of baptism returning the church to a singular sacramental rite of initiation into membership in Christ’s Holy Church. What is at stake is clarity about the primacy of God’s gracious initiative and action in the sacrament of baptism which precedes human response in the work of salvation. Furthermore, human response should not be a single ritual event in which one receives a bestowal of the Holy Spirit or makes a one-time profession of faith.

Infant “confirmation” would not differ from adolescent confirmation in many respects. As I argued earlier in this paper, the burden of Methodist pastoral ministry ought to be the cultivation of thick, Spirit-filled communities of discipleship formation which foster *continued participation* in the way of salvation through the means of grace. However, this approach would (1) end the practice of confirmation as a professional rite at the onset of adolescence and place the invocation of the Holy Spirit and laying on of hands within the sacrament of baptism immediately following the water washing; (2) seek to create a unified event of sacramental initiation involving water bath— invocation of the Holy Spirit and

laying on of hands (“confirmation”)—eucharist;¹¹⁶ (3) heighten the pneumatological dimensions of baptism emphasizing that divine initiative precedes human action, desire, and profession.

Instead of confirmation as a one-time unrepeatable rite of profession at the onset of adolescence, American Methodists should fully embrace the regular and repeatable rite of baptismal covenant renewal. Certainly, there should be focused times of catechesis and religious education at particular stages of life. However, fully embracing the regular and repeatable practice of baptismal covenant renewal would allow the Church the resources to craft more theologically, socially, and psychologically healthy rituals not only at the beginning of adolescence but also at the end of adolescence as college students and recent college graduates are entering what the psychologist Jeffrey Arnett has called “emerging adulthood.”¹¹⁷

This approach could have broader implications for a theology of Wesleyan formation. From the perspective of a practitioner, one can conceive of opportunities at multiple stages of life—the beginning of marriage, of parenting, of retirement—to renew

¹¹⁶ A unified Wesleyan rite of initiation would be reminiscent of Eastern Orthodox initiatory practice in which baptismal immersion is followed by *chrismation*, an anointing with the Holy Chrism signifying the seal of the Holy Spirit. Here I suggest the gesture of laying on of hands rather than an anointing with oil as the appropriate ritual gesture because of the clear connection in the Acts of the Apostles between the laying on of hands and the gift of the Holy Spirit. The gesture of laying on of hands is more familiar to American Methodists than the practice of anointing with oil.

¹¹⁷ Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, “Emerging Adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties.” *American Psychologist*, Vol. 55(5), May 2000, 469-480.

one's baptismal covenant and reaffirm the source of one's identity in baptism and to consider the telos of one's vocation in Christ.

8.4 Future Research: Covenant in Wesleyan Theology

The rites of initiation and discipleship formation practices make theological assumptions. This paper has shown that the rites of initiation are reframed in 1989 *Hymnal* and 1992 *Book of Worship* in covenantal terms. One area for future research is to explore how the category of covenant functions in Wesley's theology vis-a-vis liturgical and discipleship practices of initiation and continuation. At first glance, the current shape of rites of initiation which allow for a regular reaffirmation of the baptismal covenant appears to have resonances for Methodists with another practice within our tradition the Wesleyan Covenant Renewal Service. What are the similarities and dissimilarities between twentieth-century rites of Baptismal Covenant Renewal and Wesley's eighteenth-century Covenant Renewal Services?¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ Jason Vickers has written "one way to understand Anglican theology in the long eighteenth century is to see it as an extended argument over the meaning and implications of the covenant of grace." Jason E. Vickers, "Wesley's Theological Emphases," *The Cambridge Companion to John Wesley*, Edited by Randy L. Maddox and Jason E. Vickers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 190-206; Vickers also reads Wesley as a covenantal thinker in theology, politics, ethics in his *Wesley: Guide to the Perplexed*, (New York: T&T Clark International, 2009); Ole E. Borgen, in his 1972 book *John Wesley on the Sacraments: A Definitive Study of John Wesley's Theology of Worship* looks briefly at the way Wesley utilizes the category of covenant in conversations about baptism. Ole E. Borgen, *John Wesley on the Sacraments: A Definitive Study of John Wesley's Theology of Worship* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press, 1972); Henry Hawthorne Knight, III, "The Baptismal Shaping of Christian Lives: Wesley's Class Meetings and Service of Covenant Renewal," *Doxology* 7 (1990) 17-22; David Howard Tripp. *The Renewal of the Covenant in the Methodist Tradition*. (London: Epworth, 1969);

8.5 Future Research: Initiation and Ecclesiology

Each time American Methodism experiences a reconstitution—1784, 1844, 1939, 1968—it has reconsidered its practice and theology of Christian initiation. Laurence Hull Stookey's *Baptism: Christ's Act in the Church* was written almost forty years ago. It feels as if American Methodism may be on the precipice of another reorganization. If that is the case, the historical work in this study is an important first step, but it may be time to think again about the construction of a Wesleyan theology of initiation for the “next Methodism.”

As this study has shown, initiatory practices presuppose an ecclesiology. Wesley bequeathed American Methodism a dual inheritance of Christian initiation—both ecclesial and societal. Over against the Anglican tradition of the church as *corpus mixtum*, Wesley had demanded more of his societies, as disciplined communities of true believers. Wesley removed confirmation leaving the sacrament of baptism—understood to be an objective and sacramental means of grace—as the sole rite of ecclesial initiation. Subjective human desire “to flee from the wrath to come,” a probationary trial period within a class meeting, and a vote at a quarterly meeting were the mechanisms of societal initiation. As long as Methodism functioned as a renewal movement within the Church of England, there was a dynamic tension between a sacramental ecclesiology and a intentional network of discipleship communities. As the first generation of American Methodism passed along the faith to the second generation, and as societies, classes, and bands declined, this dynamic tension gave way to ritual and ecclesiological confusion.

Questions of initiation and ecclesiology are particularly pressing given the ways in which scholars such as Kevin Watson have sought recently to appropriate the historical resources of early classes and bands for contemporary Methodism.¹¹⁹ Watson and others, like Rex Matthews, have drawn attention to Wesley's willingness and propensity to remove membership from Methodist societies. Such references are provocative because they throw into relief the lack of accountability in contemporary Methodist forms of communal discipleship. The appropriation of these historical models of Christian formation are very important as models of Christian discipleship. But they are also fraught because early Methodism conflate two ecclesiological conceptions. Removal from membership presupposes a conception of initiation. As Rex Matthews has written, it is very different to excommunicate someone from the church and forbid them from receiving the sacraments and to remove someone from an intentional, but supplemental, discipleship group.

There is an opportunity for future research in this area as we conceive of theologies and practices of initiation and accountability moving forward. How to weight the sacramental and the evangelical—the church as *corpus mixtum* and society as disciplined

¹¹⁹ Kevin Watson, "Holiness of Heart and Life: Unity, Holiness, and the Mission of Methodism, General Board of Higher Education and Ministry (Ed.)," in *Unity of the Church and Human Sexuality* (Nashville: General Board Of Higher Education and Ministry, 2018); *The Band Meeting: An Invitation to Intentional Relational Transformation*, (Nashville, Seedbed, 2017); *Pursuing Social Holiness: The Band Meeting in Wesley's Thought and Popular Methodist Practice*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); *The Class Meeting: Reclaiming a Forgotten (and Essential) Small Group Experience*, (Nashville, Seedbed, 2013); *A Blueprint for Discipleship: Wesley's General Rules as a Guide for Christian Living*, (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2009).

community of true believers—dimensions of a Methodist ecclesiology is an extraordinarily complex and difficult question.

8.6 Conclusion

There is a reason why this is an unresolved tension running through American Methodism from the beginning. How do we craft forms of religion—ecclesiologies, liturgies, and formational experiences—without denying the power of the Holy Spirit to work both within and beyond our forms? How do we make clear in our theology and practice the primacy of God’s gracious initiative and action in the work of salvation while also creating space for an initial and ongoing human response that deepens in the direction of holiness? The study suggests that confirmation—a practice which lies at the intersection of discipleship and worship—is a great place to engage the conversation. Confirmation is never the end; it is only the beginning.

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