

The Sacrament of Confirmation

I am going to share a personal testimony about my Confirmation. Hopefully, I will also encourage my brother Bishops and Priests to prepare those under their spiritual direction to understand the purpose of this Sacrament and expect the same thing to happen today that occurred in the Acts of the Apostles when Bishops laid hands on believers to receive the Holy Spirit. Unless we in the Charismatic Episcopal Church adequately prepare and teach that Confirmation is the sacramental counterpart to the Pentecostal prayer for the Baptism in the Holy Spirit, we will in time be no different from other denominations where they have all the forms of godliness but void of the power.

My family was active in the Methodist Church. I was baptized at three weeks of age in the Methodist Church and at twelve years of age I was confirmed, or that was what they called it. I don't remember much about the service, but I think it meant that I was made a full member of the Church. In my later years as a Methodist minister I never conducted such a service nor recall ever seeing it in their Book of Worship. Perhaps it was a special service orchestrated by the pastor of that particular congregation. I recall him as more formal and liturgical than the majority of Methodist ministers in those days.

I later became a Methodist minister, ordained as a Deacon and then an Elder. I was a pastor for eight years and in my ninth year I was Minister of Education in an 1,800 member church in Richmond, Virginia. It was while I was at this church that I made the decision to change denominations and discussed my reasons with an Episcopal priest, the Reverend Harry W. Baldwin, Rector of Saint Andrew Episcopal Church in Richmond. He was in the Diocese of Virginia and the Bishop at that time was on a national church Commission involved in ecumenicity and the Methodist Church was part of that discussion. When I approached him about changing to the Episcopal Church he suggested I stay in the Methodist Church and work from within to bring about change that would lead to uniting with the Episcopal Church. He must have thought I was something special. I told him I didn't have that long to live.

Subsequently I was introduced to Bishop David Shepherd Rose, then Suffragan Bishop of the Diocese of Southern Virginia. The James River that flowed through Richmond divided the two dioceses and Bishop Rose accepted me. I began my transition under the direction of the Reverend William Byrd Lee Hutchison, Rector of the Church of the Good Shepherd. He said the first thing I would need was to be Confirmed. I asked what that meant. His answer was that in Confirmation I would receive the strengthening gifts of the Holy Spirit.

When I was ordained a Deacon and later an Elder in the Methodist Church the ordination prayer was for me to receive the Holy Spirit for the office and work of each of these Orders. My question to Father Hutchison was had I not already received the Holy Spirit? His reply was, "I don't know. But if you want to become an Episcopalian you will have to receive the Holy Spirit this way". We had a laugh.

My wife, June, and I took the Confirmation study and on the thirty-first of May, 1964 at a special Sunday evening service, Bishop Rose confirmed June and I. It was an event I shall never forget. I cannot explain what happened at the time, but I felt something. It was unlike that Sunday afternoon at the evangelistic meeting conducted by Hyman Appleman and Jesus became real when I joined others in going forward for prayer. The Bishop laid hands on my head and prayed the Confirmation sentence, "Defend O Lord, this thy child with thy heavenly grace....". I can't describe what happened. All I can say is I felt something. Perhaps it was the Holy Spirit. In our study I learned that Confirmation was based on Acts chapter eight when the Deacon Philip had evangelized in Samaria and baptized some converts, Peter and John, two of the Apostles of Jesus, were sent from Jerusalem to go and lay hands on the newly baptized so they would receive the Holy Spirit. It was apparent the Jerusalem leadership expected what happened to them on the Day of Pentecost would also occur in the lives of these Samaritans. Peter and John laid hands on these converts and something dramatically happened that attracted the attention of a magician who wanted the ability to do the same. On other occasions when the Holy Spirit was given there were manifestations such as speaking in tongues, prophesying, and praising God. It is not stated what happened in Samaria. I personally believe they fell backward when Peter and John lay hands upon them; what is called today "resting in the Spirit" or "slain in the Spirit".

At my Confirmation I did not rest in the Spirit. I did not speak in tongues. I did not stand up and prophesy. But I felt something. Perhaps it was like John Wesley's Aldersgate Street experience when he said his "heart was strangely warmed".

It was going to be five years later that I would understand what happened that Sunday. On April 25, 1969 again something happened as a man lay hands on me and prayed. I did not identify at that moment what happened. I needed special help in ministering to a person who had been sent to me for spiritual aid. I had prayed for the Lord to help me. I later shared the episode with David duPlessis who informed me that I received the Baptism in the Holy Spirit. Subsequently on June 19, I was given a prayer language with words of an unlearned language, and this changed the whole direction of my ministry.

Please understand, I believe you receive the Holy Spirit when you are baptized. Again in my ordinations as a Methodist Deacon and Elder and later as an Episcopal Deacon and Priest, I received the Holy Spirit. At my Confirmation again I received the Holy Spirit. Each time the Holy Spirit is given and comes for specific purposes. In baptism He comes for regeneration; in ordination for authoritative ministerial reasons; in Confirmation for empowerment. On each occasion I received the Holy Spirit, but on April 25, 1969 the Holy Spirit received me. I surrendered my control to His empowerment. He became real as the Third Person of the Holy Trinity.

I began to teach those under my spiritual direction that when the Bishop confirms them to expect something to happen. We studied the plan of Salvation and I made sure every person I presented to the Bishop had made a conscious acceptance of Jesus and invited Him into their life. I emphasized the teaching of Jesus in Saint John chapters fifteen and sixteen concerning the work of the Holy Spirit. We reviewed each of the accounts in the

Acts of the Apostles where events occurred involving the Holy Spirit. I wanted those I presented to the Bishop to be receptive to whatever way the Holy Spirit wished to manifest Himself in them.

It is fine to teach in Confirmation class the history of Christianity and the Church. That along with a good knowledge of the Bible is important. People should know something about the Sacraments and have a good understanding of the meaning of Holy Communion and what "the Real Presence" means. Teach these things. But neglect not the emphasis on a personal relationship with Jesus, and the reason the Bishop lays on his hands in this special service. Tell them to expect something to happen because the Bishop as a successor to the Apostles is given the authority to impart the Holy Spirit in the Name of Jesus.

It is not graduation from Sunday School. Statistics say that one out of three confirmed never continue in Church. This is the fault of the Priest who fails to prepare them adequately. The Bishop must also share some responsibility in this failure if he does not emphasize what he is going to do when he lays hands on the candidate.

Since the Scripture quoted in the Confirmation service is that of Peter and John giving the Holy Spirit to the newly baptized in Samaria, Confirmation in the catholic Faith is the Baptism in the Holy Spirit. Bishops and Priests should expect visible manifestations during a service of Confirmation. As the first Apostles were given the authority to pray for people to be baptized in the Holy Spirit, so Bishops today as successors of the early Apostles are given the authority to empower believers with the Holy Spirit. Jesus is the Baptizer (Saint John 1: 29-34); the Bishop is His delivery agent. That is the purpose of Confirmation. Some have called it the ordination of the laity for ministry. In Confirmation we are given the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to equip us for ministry and be witnesses to what Jesus has done in His atonement. Prior to His ascension He told the Apostles they would be baptized in the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5,8) that took place on the Day of Pentecost. It was so different from Jesus breathing on them and saying, "receive the Holy Spirit" on that first Pascal evening. That account in Saint John 20: 19-23 was regeneration and Apostolic authority to pronounce absolution of sins. Pentecost was empowerment to witness about Jesus, the chief purpose for being a Christian. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit on that day was so powerful that those followers of Jesus were sold out to Him and not only praised God with exuberant hearts, but boldly witnessed to others in Jerusalem resulting in three thousand souls being saved by the atoning Blood of Jesus.

One Sunday I visited an Episcopal Church when a Bishop friend was present for Confirmation. I observed how patiently he ministered to the half dozen young people he confirmed. He took time with each in not only the liturgical words but also in personal prayer. When he completed the Prayer Book service he asked each person to share what they experienced. I was emotionally stirred by his expectation compared to some Bishops who appear to be a confirmation machine, hurriedly saying the Prayer Book words as if they have another appointment to keep. It was obvious the Priest had prepared them to expect something to happen, and the Bishop expected something also.

I have told people who after their personal Confirmation felt something missing, pray to Jesus to release in them what the Bishop conveyed when he laid on hands. They received the Holy Spirit. Let Him be released to empower them as Jesus' disciple. I tell them, "you may discover in reading the Bible you understand more than before. You may find your prayer life change. You may begin to praise God in a language you have not learned. You may have a hunger for more opportunities to worship. You may develop a desire to share what Jesus means to you with others." Confirmation is intended to assist us on a road to spiritual growth and maturity. Let Him do it!

Some one may ask if this is the Baptism in the Holy Spirit, why should people who have already received the Baptism be confirmed when joining our Communion. If new members have not been confirmed by a Bishop in Apostolic Succession but are charismatic, I tell them Confirmation by the Bishop is the Church's confirming what Jesus has already given.