



Exploring Confirmation

Workbook: Embraced by and Embracing the Covenant

© 2018 Geneva Press

First edition

Published by Geneva Press

Louisville, Kentucky

All rights reserved. Except where permission to photocopy is expressly granted on the material, no part of these materials may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. For information, address Geneva Press, 100 Witherspoon Street, Louisville, Kentucky 40202-1396.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., and used by permission. In some instances, adaptations have been made to a Scripture or a confession to make the language inclusive.

Excerpts from *Book of Order* and *Book of Confessions* have been used throughout this resource. Both are reprinted with permission of the Office of the General Assembly.

Writers: Ronald P. Byars and Eva Stimson

Printed in the United States of America

Most Geneva Press books are available at special quantity discounts when purchased in bulk by corporations, organizations, and special-interest groups. For more information, please e-mail SpecialSales@GenevaPress.com.

Ronald P. Byars served as pastor of Presbyterian congregations for over three decades, until he joined the faculty of Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, as professor of preaching and worship. He has written extensively about worship and contributed the section on the Service for the Lord's Day to *The Companion to the Book of Common Worship*. Among his books are *Christian Worship*, *Lift Your Hearts on High: Eucharistic Prayer in The Reformed Tradition*, and *The Sacraments in Biblical Perspective*. He is retired and lives in Lexington, Kentucky.

Eva Stimson, a graduate of the Presbyterian School of Christian Education (now Union Presbyterian Seminary), is a freelance writer and editor, an oil painter, and the former editor of *Presbyterians Today*. She is a ruling elder, Sunday school teacher, and member of Crescent Hill Presbyterian Church in Louisville, Kentucky. Eva wrote the sessions for group study.

Donald K. McKim is the editor for *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding*, an adult curriculum of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Dr. McKim is an honorably retired Presbyterian minister who has been an editor for Westminster John Knox Press, a seminary theology professor, an academic dean, and a pastor. He is the author and editor of books on Reformed theology, including *Introducing the Reformed Faith*; *Presbyterian Beliefs: A Brief Introduction*; *Presbyterian Questions, Presbyterian Answers*; *More Presbyterian Questions, More Presbyterian Answers*; *the Westminster Handbook to Reformed Theology*, and *The Church: Presbyterian Perspectives*. He lives with his wife, LindaJo McKim, in Germantown, Tennessee. They have two married children and three grandchildren.



Exploring Confirmation

Workbook: Embraced by and Embracing the Covenant

Introduction.....	3
Ways of Using This Workbook.....	5
Section 1. Who is Confirming Who or What?	7
Who will be in Our Confirmation Class This Year?	
Confirmation: A Practice with a Confusing History	
The Protestant Reformers’ Critique	
Embraced, and Embracing	
Section 2. From the Baptized Roll to the Active Roll.....	19
Joining the Church?	
Step by Step in the Life of Faith	
Promises to Keep	
Faith Blossoms in Its Own Way at Different Stages of Life	
Section 3. Affirming the Covenant.....	29
Now It’s Your Move	
What’s a Covenant?	
“Chosen” is not as Easy as It Sounds	
Job Description for a “Priestly” People	
Section 4. Promises to Keep.....	39
Not to be Skipped Over Lightly, Do You Think?	
No One is in This All Alone	
A Super Challenge: Turning Away and Renouncing	
The Answer Just Has to Include “With God’s Help”	
Section 5. Words Need Help: Body Language	49
Appraising the Situation: New Occasions Teach New Duties	
Can We Take Our Bodies to Church with Us?	
The Heart May Follow Where the Body Leads	
For We are the Aroma of Christ, a Fragrance from Life to Life	
Section 6. It’s about Faith, a Gift of the Spirit	59
An Engagement of Mind and Heart	
God Works in, through, and with Our Very Human Being	
Faith is not Rare even among Atheists	
Confirm Us by Your Holy Spirit!	
Section 7. For Parents and Children	81
Sessions for Group Study	87
Suggestions For Further Study.....	113



Introduction

The rite of Confirmation is part of the church's life and ministries. It is an expression of Christian faith by those being confirmed. It is also an expression of the work of God's Holy Spirit in the lives of those being confirmed and within the church as the "communion of saints." In Confirmation, confirmands are embraced by the power of the Holy Spirit.

In this workbook, we find wise and sensitive perspectives on the meaning of Confirmation and its practices in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Local churches carry out the Confirmation process in varieties of ways. There are diverse practices through which those who are baptized come to make their profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The Confirmation experience varies, but it holds special meaning for the young people who take this step on their journeys of Christian faith.

Through it all, this workbook helps those involved with Confirmation in different roles reflect on the meaning of what is being carried out in the church's Confirmation rite. Helpfully, we read here that "when we say that this class of young people is going to *be confirmed* (passive voice) we understand it in this sense: supported by the church's prayer, they are being *strengthened* in, by, and with the Holy Spirit." This puts the focus in exactly the right place: the strengthening of those being confirmed by the prayers of the church and the sustaining work of the Holy Spirit. This is a theological grounding for what is being done; and it is the foundation for the church's ongoing ministries in nurturing Christian faith.

"Embraced by and embracing the covenant" is an important image we are given here. Young people who are part of the Confirmation process are embraced and welcomed into the church at baptism. The Sacrament of Baptism is a means of God's grace to draw us into the community of faith. "But as life progresses," writes Ronald Byars, "God continues to welcome us into new stages of faith and accountability." We have "the opportunity over and over to embrace the covenant in which God embraces us." In Confirmation, young people confess their faith and appropriate God's covenant love in Jesus Christ. "And over all," writes Byars, "the theme might continue to be trust in the faithfulness of the Holy Spirit to strengthen us, and the whole church of Christ." The Christian life as a journey is marked by important events along its way, and Confirmation in the church is a significant one.

This workbook will be a key resource for all who are interested in Confirmation in the church. It offers vital perspectives on different dimensions of the Confirmation process and what it can mean for the lives of young confirmands and for the church community, which welcomes and continues to nurture these young Christians in their lives of faith.

Donald K. McKim
Editor



Ways of Using This Workbook

Unlike baptism and the Lord's Supper (Eucharist), Confirmation is not a sacrament in any of the churches descended from the Protestant Reformation, including the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Confirmation developed historically to meet explicit needs of particular times and communities. At the Reformation, the Reformers re-formed it when they recognized the needs for individuals who had been baptized in infancy to come to a crossroads, as it were—the opportunity to make a personal profession of their faith and the faith of the church. That remains a value in the twenty-first-century church, particularly when a secularized and secularizing culture makes it clearer than ever that faith cannot be taken for granted, but requires both lifelong nurture and intentional resolve. For it to have integrity, Confirmation must be more than a perfunctory coming-of-age ceremony. That means that those who practice and support it need to find as much clarity of purpose as possible as they form and shape their practice. This workbook is intended to lay some foundations that may aid in acquiring greater clarity and purpose. It may be particularly helpful in situations when used by the following:

- Worship Committees and Sessions whose responsibility according to the PC(USA) includes spiritual oversight of the congregation, including oversight of baptism, pastoral care, and the various membership rolls
- Committees on Preparation for Ministry as they work with those taken under care and preparing for ordained ministry
- seminaries or seminary classes that help to prepare students who expect to serve in pastoral ministry
- pastor(s), educators, mentors, and members of Christian Education committees or nurturing teams whose work includes designing and executing preparation for Confirmation
- groups of parents or guardians whose children are in Confirmation classes, or are trying to decide whether such preparation is appropriate for their children, or who are likely to have a child in Confirmation class in the near future, or whose offspring have experienced Confirmation recently, or whose children have gone through the Confirmation process but decided not to be confirmed yet
- leaders of classes for inquirers or others new to the church generally, or to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in particular
- grandparents eager to understand and encourage family members who are making decisions related to Confirmation
- parents of young children who have decided to have their children baptized and are willing to think ahead about how they might be expected to follow up on their commitment as it leads to another important step for their child in the future

- with groups small or large who wish to understand the church's teaching better
- for all-church retreats or programs for Presbyterian Women, Presbyterian Men, youth groups, or UKirk
- as part of the preparation of those seeking to be commissioned by the Presbytery to serve as Commissioned Ruling Elders.



Who is Confirming Who or What?

Read John 15:26–27

What comes to mind when you hear the word “advocate”?

What does “testify” mean?

Who is testifying to what?



Who will be in Our Confirmation Class This Year?

What are we trying to do in Confirmation? This question begs to be answered whenever a pastor or pastoral team sits down to plan this year's Confirmation class. If more than one person will be seeking Confirmation, we already know what the possibilities are. If there will be three prospects for the class, one will have been baptized as an infant or young child and will have been regularly present in Church School, worship, and youth groups. A second will have been baptized at a young age, but will have rarely been involved in any study, worship, or program of the church. A third may or may not have been baptized, and may or may not have been a regular presence in the congregation. Similarly, one may be an eager participant; another may be there reluctantly and under parental pressure; and the other may be anything from curious to indifferent.

They will come willingly and unwillingly, without any promise that the experience will enhance their social life, their academics, or their future employment prospects. Time spent on Confirmation will compete with time required for homework, sports, extracurricular lessons, household chores, and just hanging out. The challenge of leading such a class will be great enough even when we have a clear idea of what we are going to do, and why; more so when we are uncertain.

Getting to know young people who are often around the ages of twelve, thirteen, or fourteen has its rewards. Confirmation preparation can, under the right circumstances, be a delight for all concerned, even if no one is sure what it is about or why they had to do it. Still, the main question persists: What is it that we are trying to do?

Given the makeup of the group as described above, we might be trying to offer a whole Christian education within the span of a few weeks (or in some circumstances, an academic year), presuming that some will have missed such an education entirely. Or, it may be a cram course, preparing the candidates to “pass” an exam before the session. In some cases, it may be simply a matter of drawing together a process of Christian formation that has been under way for a long time. The “class” should be understood not only as a process for imparting information but also as a time for enhancing or forming a sense of community with a clearly spiritual dimension. In some cases, Confirmation class might even be understood as a gate-keeping process, identifying who is not ready or willing to go any further. Or, perhaps the class will require its members to unlearn some of the perceptions about Christian faith they have picked up from peers, social media, or even poorly informed adults. In most cases, Confirmation classes will need to meet several of these needs all at once.

Who organizes preparation for Confirmation in your congregation? Who else has a role in the Confirmation process? What is expected of parents who have children in the group?

How likely is the congregation to recognize the young people in recent Confirmation groups as having been present and visible in your congregation before the Confirmation process began?

Should parents require their child to be part of a Confirmation program even when the child resists? Why? Why not?

What kind of roles do you think the congregation should play in supporting and welcoming the confirmands and the efforts of those who are working with them?



Confirmation: A Practice with a Confusing History

The name “Confirmation” itself adds to our confusion. It is a natural presumption that it has to do with corroborating or ratifying something, and so it must be the young people who are doing the confirming. What would they be confirming? Well, it seems logical that they are confirming (ratifying) something said or done for them before they could give their personal consent. Since, in the larger number of cases, those who have come to be confirmed were baptized in infancy or childhood, we jump to the conclusion that since a parent or parents made promises when their children were baptized, it is up to the baptized children who have now reached a certain age of maturity to confirm those promises made by parents on their behalf. Those are natural presumptions, and have a certain logic to them, but they are not quite right.

When bringing their children for baptism, parents make a profession of faith. However, they make such a profession for themselves. We do not baptize children in general, but children whose parent or persons exercising parental responsibility are members of the church of Jesus Christ and thus reasonably expected to be able to keep promises to nurture their children in the body of Christ. To raise a child in the faith requires a parent who professes that faith (*Book of Order*, W-3.0403). A baptized person who reaches the moment of making a first profession of faith is not confirming promises once made by a parental surrogate on her behalf.

The ambiguity of the term “Confirmation” becomes clear when we hear ourselves ask, “When will the members of the class *be confirmed*?” Or we write in our Christmas letter, “John and Raquel *were confirmed* on Pentecost.” Without thinking about it, we have shifted from language that implies that John and Raquel are confirming something to language that implies that they have received something.

Historically, Confirmation refers to the latter. Raquel and John and the other members of the preparation class are *receiving* something. The church, through its agents, is confirming them. An ambiguous word, “Confirmation” originated as a name to describe the ritual acts of laying on of hands and/or anointing with oil accompanied by prayer as part of the baptismal rite, emblematic of the gift of the Holy Spirit in the sacrament.

Historians debate how and why these ritual acts that came to be known as “Confirmation” first appeared. Baptism itself—washing with water in the name of the Holy Trinity—was understood from New Testament times as the occasion for the gift of the Holy Spirit. In time, as the baptismal liturgy developed, it typically concluded with a rite of laying on of hands and anointing with oil, ritually focusing attention on the action of the Holy Spirit in the sacrament.

In ancient times, adult baptisms occurred in a separate place (perhaps in a “baptistery” erected near the place of assembly), rather than in the assembled congregation. Those being baptized

were nude, and water was used in great quantities, either poured over the candidates or enough in which to be submerged. From the baptistery, the newly baptized, now clothed, entered the waiting assembly, and joined it for the first time in the Lord's Supper (Eucharist). The rituals of laying on of hands and anointing may have served in that situation as a rite of welcome, a public confirmation of the baptism that had occurred out of sight of the congregation, with the presiding pastor (bishop) adding prayers for God's grace that the newly baptized might be faithful to the identity given in their baptism.

In the Middle Ages, when the medieval church taught that baptism was necessary for salvation, infants often died soon after birth. It became a matter of course for midwives to baptize a newborn at risk. Midwives probably baptized more infants than did the clergy. Although irregular, it was permitted. "Confirmation"—laying on of hands and anointing with oil—would not have occurred when a midwife had performed the sacrament. If the child survived, the bishop's acts of "Confirmation" might have served as an official recognition of and "completion" of so-called "emergency" baptisms.

Similarly, where there were Christian groups (sometimes identified as heretics or schismatics) that had broken away from the larger body, the mainstream (catholic) church nevertheless recognized all baptisms with water in the name of the Trinity. However, Catholics regularized

those seeking reconciliation with the mainstream church in a rite of laying on of hands and anointing by a bishop—i.e., "confirming" them in their new status.

The Sacrament of Baptism was understood to be the responsibility of the chief officer of the local church (the pastor/bishop), but as the church grew and the number of worshipping assemblies under this officer's leadership increased, it was not always possible for the pastor/bishop to be present for every baptism. The pastor/bishop delegated this responsibility to local presbyters (ministers). Baptisms administered by presbyters, however, stopped short of laying on of hands and anointing, reserving that part of the rite to the community's chief officer whenever a visitation to the local assembly might become possible—sometimes months or even years later. Such Confirmations did not involve a personal profession of faith by those being confirmed.

Since the Confirmation ritual had typically become separated from the baptismal rite itself, it became necessary to justify it as a separate action. The theological rationale offered was that Confirmation represented an act of strengthening with the Holy Spirit those who had already been baptized. (The word "confirm," from the Latin *confirmare*, means "to strengthen.") So, when we say that this class of young people is going to *be confirmed* (passive voice) we understand it in this sense: supported by the church's prayer, they are being *strengthened* in, by, and with the Holy Spirit.

How do you think the people of your congregation understand the word “Confirmation”?

Often, Confirmation classes include one or more members whose parents did not bring them to be baptized as children. These will be baptized and confirmed at the same time. How might that confuse or clarify the meaning of the word “Confirmation”?

Can you name occasions other than Confirmation that are meant to serve to strengthen baptized people in, with, and by the Holy Spirit?

If your pastor has a copy of the Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship*, ask to see these liturgies: Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant Marking Occasions of Growth in Faith, and Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant in Pastoral Counseling.¹ Any surprises? Have you or would you like to experience either of these yourself?

1. *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 478, 485.



The Protestant Reformers' Critique

In the sixteenth-century Protestant reform, the various Reformers examined pre-Reformation practices critically, and found Confirmation to pose a problem. Neither Martin Luther nor John Calvin found any evidence in Scripture that the Sacrament of Baptism could or should be divided into two parts, first with water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and finished later by the laying on of hands and anointing with oil. Luther, in fact, called Confirmation “monkey business.” Calvin was even more adamant, arguing that there was no reason for the Reformers to take it seriously since the Roman Church, in his view, did not. The Reformers’ chief concern was for the integrity of the Sacrament of Baptism, since Confirmation as practiced implied that baptism had been somehow incomplete. But the Roman Church was on the defensive, and at its Council of Trent (1545–1563), dug in its heels and declared that Confirmation was one of seven sacraments.

The Second Helvetic Confession (1561), a part of our Presbyterian *Book of Confessions* (BOC), denies that Confirmation is a sacrament,

declaring, “Confirmation and extreme unction are human inventions which the Church can dispense with without any loss, and, indeed, we do not have them in our churches.” (BOC 5.171) However, Martin Bucer, the reformer of Strasbourg and a mentor of Calvin’s, had produced a Reformed rite in place of the Roman. Calvin believed it would be useful to have a rite that he described as “True confirmation,” “in which children or those near adolescence would give an account of their faith before the church,” after a period of learning the catechism. He suggested ten years old as the most appropriate age. Calvin wrote:

“Thus, while the church looks on as witness, [the child] would profess the one true and sincere faith, in which the believing folk with one mind worship the one God.”²

The focus, then, would be on a cognitive exercise—memorizing the questions and answers of the catechism including the Apostles’ Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord’s Prayer.

2. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Edited by John T. McNeill. 2 vols. Library of Christian Classics 20-21 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 4.19.13.

Does your church make use of any Presbyterian catechism in its programs, such as *The Study Catechism: Confirmation Version*?

What do you think might be the best use of a catechism?

Do you agree with Calvin that ten would be a good age for giving “an account of their faith before the church”?



Embraced, and Embracing

Does the model of memorizing content show us what Confirmation preparation should be? There should be little doubt that learning the basic content of the Christian faith ought to be part of the process, though educators have discovered that people don't all learn in the same way. And surely there is more to giving "account of their faith before the church" than repeating undigested answers, however correct.

If Confirmation preparation is partly remedial education—a combination of learning, unlearning, relearning, and contextualizing specific content—surely it is also an emotional learning and an acquiring of ways of practicing the faith. That being the case, preparation is not just one thing, but several things, and "class" is sometimes the right word and sometimes doesn't do justice to the process. It should also be clear that to do these things well requires diversity of leadership, including leaders who are emotionally savvy as well as those who

are disciplined and informed enough to engage young minds.

Two values seem to emerge from the various pre- and post-Reformation versions of this rite of passage. One is the Reformation insight that the young people are doing something—giving an account of their faith as it is at the moment; while the other is the pre-Reformation accent on the fact that God is at work in and through the church to do something for and with the confirmands. If there should be only one word to encompass the whole, it might be "embrace." Yes, they were embraced, welcomed into the church at baptism; but as life progresses God continues to welcome us into new stages of faith and accountability for it, and we have the opportunity over and over to embrace the covenant in which God embraces us. And overall, the theme might continue to be trust in the faithfulness of the Holy Spirit to strengthen us, and the whole church of Christ.

Can you think of ways of preparing young people for Confirmation that are different from a formal "class"? Or in addition to a formal class?

When a young person decides not to attend the Confirmation preparation, or declines to be confirmed, is there a next step? Any options for those who need more time?

What do you think “emotionally savvy” means? What might it look like in practice in a Confirmation context?

Is your life of faith a steady state? Or does it vary by stages and experience? Do you ever feel the need to reconfirm it?

For Your Reflection and Action

1. If you are a church member, at some point you made a profession of faith, whether after or before being baptized. When you made that profession, was there a laying on of hands with prayer? Anointing?
2. Are those ritual acts in use in your congregation? At baptisms? At Confirmation?
3. In your congregation, is Confirmation a big day, like Pentecost, for example? Or just an unusual digression in the order of service? What happens in and around the service that makes it a “big” day for those being confirmed and their parents? For the congregation as a whole?
4. Do you remember your own Confirmation? Or the Confirmation of a family member? What do your memories tell you about the experience and the process of preparing for it?
5. Find the names of those who were confirmed in your congregation most recently, and/or those now preparing for Confirmation, and pray for them by name during this study. Use this prayer “For Young People”:

Almighty God,
you see your children growing up
in an uncertain and confusing world.
Show them that your ways give more life
than the ways of the world,
and that following you
is better than chasing after selfish goals.
Help them to take failure,
not as a measure of their worth,
but as an opportunity for a new start.
Give them strength to hold their faith in you
and to keep alive their joy in your creation;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.³

3. *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 825.