

Muddying the Waters of Baptism: The Theology Committee's Report on Baptism, Confirmation, and Christian Formation

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This article examines the 2005 report of the Theology Committee of the House of Bishops, "Forming Christians: Reflections on Baptism, Confirmation, and Christian Formation." It finds that contributors to the report misunderstand the liturgical theology of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, propose the introduction of an initiatory theology alien to the Prayer Book, and neglect the history of baptism and confirmation in the West. Additionally, a survey of bishops' practices within the report shows that many either reject or do not understand the clear statements of the Prayer Book and canons concerning initiation. The article proposes that confirmation and reception be eliminated, to be replaced by the sole, repeatable, and optional rite of reaffirmation of baptismal vows.

The 1979 Book of Common Prayer represents a number of advancements for the liturgy of the Episcopal Church, among them establishing the Eucharist as the central act of worship, reviving the ancient church's observances of the Triduum, and reasserting the role of the laity in worship. But none of its achievements is as important as its revision of the rite of baptism. Indeed, the 1979 baptismal rite is part of a general reordering of the life of the church around what has been termed a "baptismal ecclesiology." Yet a recent report by the House of Bishops Theology Committee reveals that the church needs to reengage with the vital issues of Christian initiation. Sadly, the report itself will be of only limited use in this process, because several of its writers misunderstand the history and liturgical theology behind the 1979 Prayer Book and have neglected to study the liturgical texts themselves.

The liturgical changes that the 1979 Prayer Book brought are considerable. In the days of the 1928 Prayer Book, baptism frequently took place in private, outside of the Sunday liturgy. Now, the ordinary

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(as opposed to emergency) rite of baptism is all but prohibited outside of the principal worship service of the community, on a Sunday or major feast, and the clear implication of the additional directions is that baptisms should take place only at the Easter Vigil, Pentecost, All Saints' Day (or the Sunday following), the Baptism of our Lord, or when a bishop visits.¹ The 1928 Prayer Book's liturgical text presented baptism as what my liturgics professor in seminary termed "celestial fire insurance," intended simply to keep the baby (and it was almost always a baby) out of the fires of hell. The 1979 Prayer Book situates baptism as both entry into the body of Christ and commissioning as a disciple. The 1979 Prayer Book even managed to reassemble the bits of the ancient church's initiatory rite of baptism, returning the imposition of hands upon and chrismation of the candidate to the rite. These were elements that once constituted the freestanding rite of confirmation, even if Episcopalians do not call these postbaptismal ceremonies "confirmation" in their liturgical text.²

Above all else, the 1979 Prayer Book, for the first time, explicitly stated that "Holy Baptism is full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ's Body the Church."³ The prefatory section where this is found, "Concerning the Service," further states, "The bond which God establishes in Baptism is indissoluble."⁴ Despite the attempts of some to undercut this language through sophisticated arguments,⁵ the plain

¹ The Book of Common Prayer (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979) [henceforth BCP 1979], 298, 312.

² See Leonel L. Mitchell, *Worship: Initiation and the Churches* (Washington D.C.: Pastoral Press, 1991), 10-11; Daniel B. Stevick, *Baptismal Moments, Baptismal Meanings* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1987), 134-137. Note that Marion Hatchett sees an attempt by Cranmer in the 1549 Prayer Book to incorporate the essence of medieval confirmation—the "*unctio spiritus sancti*" [unction of the Holy Spirit]—into the baptismal rite performed by presbyters. The anointing disappeared in the 1552 revision, but a consignation with a formula reminiscent of the medieval confirmation rite was retained. Marion J. Hatchett, "The Rite of 'Confirmation' in The Book of Common Prayer and in *Authorized Services 1973*," *Anglican Theological Review* 56, no. 3 (July 1974): 300-306.

³ BCP 1979, 298.

⁴ BCP 1979, 298.

⁵ For example, Reginald Fuller tried to limit the sense of "full initiation" to mean "full sacramental initiation," presumably allowing for a sort of half-participation in the life of the church on the part of the merely baptized but not-yet-confirmed. Reginald H. Fuller, "Confirmation in the Episcopal Church and in the Church of England," in Kendig Brubaker Cully, ed., *Confirmation Re-Examined* (Wilton, Conn.: Morehouse-Barlow, 1982), 18.

sense of the Prayer Book is that baptism is the single and complete initiatory act by which one becomes a full member of the Body.

This teaching has not been fully received in all corners of the Episcopal Church. Even liturgy professors are aware of that fact; one need only hear a few stories of persons baptized on random Sundays or even at an Easter Sunday *morning* Eucharist instead of the Vigil, or of parents refusing to allow their baptized children to receive communion until they “understand” the sacrament or until the completion of some ersatz first communion ritual. One accepts that not all parts of the church have absorbed the liturgical scholarship and pastoral teaching that was state-of-the-art twenty-seven years ago. Novelty is a particular challenge to Episcopalians, even when the novelty was not in fact so novel at all, being largely a return to the liturgical structures and patterns of ancient Christian liturgies.

But it was a blow, at least to the present author, to read the report by the Theology Committee of the House of Bishops concerning confirmation and Christian formation. Bishops occupy an important teaching office within the church, and they serve as the chief liturgical officers within their dioceses. It is crucial that they grasp the theology and proper use of the current Prayer Book, to serve as expositors of its ethos and as practitioners of its rites. The Theology Committee’s report shows that a number of bishops either do not understand or simply reject the baptismal theology of the 1979 Prayer Book.

The report is comprised of essays on confirmation and formation, plus a survey of bishops’ confirmation practices. An introduction by William Gregg, Bishop of Eastern Oregon, frames questions of formation and confirmation, with an interest in what it means to join the Episcopal Church as a particular expression of the larger church. A piece by Robert Ihloff, Bishop of Maryland, and A. Katherine Grieb, Professor of New Testament at Virginia Theological Seminary, frames a role for the bishop in catechetical formation.

There is a thoughtful contribution by Joe Burnett, bishop of Nebraska, addressing the liturgical theology behind the 1979 Prayer Book’s initiatory rites. This helpful essay is worth careful reading. But the other essays that address confirmation are problematic. Essays by Henry Parsley, Bishop of Alabama, and Kathryn Tanner, Professor of Theology at the University of Chicago Divinity School, threaten the achievements of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, by reinserting a flawed initiatory theology (founded on a misreading of history) that is alien to the present Prayer Book.

Henry Parsley argues that there is an essential role for the bishop in “sealing” the newly baptized, an argument that draws only from the narrow stream of the Roman liturgical tradition, overlooking patterns evident in Gaul before the Carolingian reforms, as well as in the Mozarabic and Ambrosian rites.⁶ In his essay, he advocates continuance of episcopal confirmation as a means of “ensur[ing] that persons chosen for leadership in the Episcopal Church have received substantial formation in the Anglican tradition and have a relationship with the bishop.” The essay further suggests that the rite of episcopal confirmation is a “continuing gift to the Church . . . not a liturgical deformation of the unified rite of Baptism, but a liturgical evolution to meet the developing needs of the Church in terms of Christian formation and the reality of differing Christian traditions.” The essay states, “The work of the Holy Spirit continually trumps our desire for absolute theological or liturgical consistency.”⁷

Kathryn Tanner presents a theological rationale for confirmation “that avoids making confirmation a simple reaffirmation of baptismal vows,” without unseating baptism as “full and complete initiation into the body of Christ.”⁸ Tanner argues that our new identity as Christ’s own is “made real for us in baptism,” but “begins to be manifested as our own activity for a whole new way of life at confirmation,” as the believer “begins to live [the commitments of baptism] out.”⁹ Confirmation serves, in Tanner’s view, as a “public rite of accountability, in which one assumes responsibility” for baptismal promises, in something akin to “commissioning rites for Christian service.”¹⁰ While the implications of this seem to be John Westerhoff’s unfortunate notion of confirmation as “lay ordination,” Tanner claims that this does not

⁶ Leonel L. Mitchell, *Baptismal Anointing* (London: SPCK, 1966), 125; Mitchell, *Worship*, 75-102, 199-200; Gerard Austin, *The Rite of Confirmation: Anointing with the Spirit* (New York: Pueblo Publishing, 1985), 17-18; Marion J. Hatchett, “The Rite of Confirmation,” 294-295; Stevick, *Baptismal Moments*, 13, 15-16.

⁷ Henry N. Parsley, Jr., “Further Thoughts on a Theology of Confirmation,” in Theology Committee of the House of Bishops, *Forming Christians: Reflections on Baptism, Confirmation, and Christian Formation* (September 2005), 31. This 82-page report was distributed at the Fall 2005 meeting of the House of Bishops in Puerto Rico, September 22-27, 2005.

⁸ Kathryn Tanner, “Towards a New Theology of Confirmation,” in Theology Committee, *Forming Christians*, 33-43, at 33; Kathryn Tanner, “Towards a New Theology of Confirmation,” *Anglican Theological Review (ATR)* 88, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 96.

⁹ Tanner, “Towards a New Theology,” 34-35; *ATR* 88: 86-87.

¹⁰ Tanner, “Towards a New Theology,” 36; *ATR* 88: 88.

follow, because it would not “convey any new status.”¹¹ The unrepeatability of confirmation, in contrast to the repeatability of the Eucharist or of rites of reaffirmation of baptism, is important to Tanner. By this means, confirmation “has the same sort of spiritual force as the unrepeatability of baptism,” underscoring God’s “irrevocable faithfulness.”¹² Taking up a medieval distinction, she argues that in baptism and confirmation the Spirit operates in different ways: uniting us to Christ in baptism, while giving “the quickening power of the Spirit” in confirmation.¹³

This is, in many ways, reminiscent of the debate over *Prayer Book Studies 18* and *Prayer Book Studies 26*, in which some Episcopal bishops clung to the (nonrepeatable, allegedly sacramental) rite of confirmation.¹⁴ They did so to the point of reinserting a nonrepeatable confirmation rite into the 1979 Prayer Book, where the early assays of *Prayer Book Studies 18* and *Prayer Book Studies 26* had in one case omitted any rite at all and in the other case had offered only a repeatable rite of reaffirmation of baptismal vows. The bishops’ maneuver in the 1970s came out of what Terry Holmes rightly described as a “deep emotional commitment to Confirmation,” despite available historical and liturgical data.¹⁵ This emotional commitment was perhaps best represented in the legendary, and perhaps apocryphal, cry of one member in the House of Bishops, “But what will bishops *do*?”¹⁶ Surely visiting parishes to preach, preside at the Eucharist and at baptism, and teach the faith would be sufficient apostolic work to keep the bishops busy, and would provide a better model of episcopacy.

One of the report’s deficiencies is that, aside from a bibliography culled from the reading suggestions from five liturgics professors (of

¹¹ Tanner, “Towards a New Theology,” 42; *ATR* 88: 94. See John Westerhoff, “Aspects of Adult Confirmation,” in Cully, ed., *Confirmation Re-Examined*, 115.

¹² Tanner, “Towards a New Theology,” 37; *ATR* 88: 89.

¹³ Tanner, “Towards a New Theology,” 38-39; *ATR* 88: 91.

¹⁴ *Holy Baptism with the Laying-on-of-Hands: Prayer Book Studies 18* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1970); *Holy Baptism, Together with a Form for Confirmation or the Laying-On of Hands by the Bishop with the Affirmation of Baptismal Vows* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1973).

¹⁵ Urban T. Holmes, “Theologians and the Bishops,” *Anglican Theological Review* 56, no. 3 (July 1974): 256.

¹⁶ The cry brings to mind suffragan bishops, who in Lee Mitchell’s estimation have as their only *liturgical* reason for being the administration of confirmation. See Leonel L. Mitchell, “The Theology of Christian Initiation and *The Proposed Book of Common Prayer*,” *Anglican Theological Review* 60, no. 4 (October 1978): 417.

which I was one), there were no contributions from scholars in the field of liturgics. This failure to engage with the field of liturgics and liturgical theology is doubly confusing, given that the House of Bishops counts within its number two noted liturgiologists, Neil Alexander and Paul Marshall. Consequently, the report was impoverished: only Burnett's essay was at all attentive to the liturgical theology of the initiatory rites of the Prayer Book. The failure to consult is not helped by appeal to the participation of professional theologians, such as Kathryn Tanner and Ellen Charry, because liturgiology is a distinct field of inquiry.

Indeed, the absence of a liturgiologist's perspective probably contributed to the startling errors and omissions in the report. A liturgiologist could have pointed out that the Anglican Communion alone among the Christian churches insists on episcopal confirmation as a normative rite of passage. The Lutherans, the Methodists, and even the Roman Catholics allow presbyteral confirmation.¹⁷ In the present Roman Catholic Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, when the bishop does not baptize the adult candidate, the baptizing presbyter is to confirm them immediately; it is only in rare cases and for "serious reason" that confirmation is permitted to be delayed after baptism until a bishop is present.¹⁸ Against this background, Parsley, in his contribution to the report, argues for the "importance of the bishop's role" in initiation as manifested in confirmation, which he identifies with the "essential" postbaptismal "sealing" with the Spirit that historically broke free of baptism and became the freestanding rite of confirmation.¹⁹ Yet clearly the Roman Catholic Church—an institution with at least as long a tradition of episcopacy as the Episcopal Church, and one that is even more resistant to the trendy (consider the history of the vernacular mass)—has decided that the bishop need not be the minister of "confirmation" to those baptized as infants and should not be the minister of "confirmation" to those baptized as adults by the parish priest. The continued reservation of "confirmation" to the bishop, and

¹⁷ *The Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978), 198-201; *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (Nashville, Tenn.: United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), 86-94, 106-110; *The Rites of the Catholic Church: Volume One* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1990), 480-481.

¹⁸ *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, study edition (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1988) [henceforth RCIA], 7, 9.

¹⁹ Parsley, "Further Thoughts," 31; Austin, *Rite of Confirmation*, 14-15; Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom, 600-1700*, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 2 (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 174-175.

the sweeping language that the present report uses to defend this practice, can only make Episcopalians appear very quaint in the eyes of our ecumenical partners. The Christian household does not, on the whole, accept the argument for the importance of episcopal confirmation.

Beyond the ecumenical difficulties, the report invites internal confusion in the church's liturgical life. The framers of the 1979 Prayer Book very intentionally restored the postbaptismal handlaying and chrismation to the baptismal rite itself and allowed a presbyter to perform them.²⁰ The structure of the 1979 baptismal rite is quite clear, right down to the handlaying and the 1979 book's prayer at chrismation, which was based on one used at confirmation, just prior to the handlaying, in prior prayer books.²¹ The sealing to which Bishop Parsley alludes is now, in fact, done in the midst of the baptismal rite, not our present confirmation rite. Our retention of a separate rite called "confirmation" is, in liturgical and theological terms, a confusing redundancy. This is not alleviated by the argument that the theological and liturgical inconsistencies of the present practice of confirmation constitute "the work of the Holy Spirit."²²

A brief survey of the history of confirmation prior to the American prayer books reveals more important data. Confirmation was born out of what once had been a single initiatory rite, combining water-baptism and a postbaptismal anointing and imposition of hands. In some liturgical traditions, such as the Gallican rite prior to the Carolingian reforms, this postbath action was not reserved to the bishop, but in the Roman rite there was an episcopal handlaying after an initial, presbyteral anointing. This Roman practice eventually prevailed in the West, with notable exceptions.²³ As the church spread, individual

²⁰ Mitchell, "Theology of Christian Initiation," 403, 407; Stevick, *Baptismal Moments*, 135.

²¹ The First and Second Prayer Books of Edward VI (London: Prayer Book Society, 1999), 250, 408; F. E. Brightman, *The English Rite*, 2nd ed. (London: Rivingtons, 1921), 794-795; Marion J. Hatchett, *Commentary on the American Prayer Book* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 279; Leonel L. Mitchell, *Praying Shapes Believing: A Theological Commentary on The Book of Common Prayer* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Morehouse Publishing, 1985), 111; The Book of Common Prayer (New York: Church Pension Fund, 1928), 297; BCP 1979, 308.

²² Parsley, "Further Thoughts," 31.

²³ Mitchell, *Baptismal Anointing*, 125; Mitchell, *Worship*, 199-200; Austin, *Rite of Confirmation*, 17-18; Hatchett, "The Rite of 'Confirmation,'" 294-295; Stevick, *Baptismal Moments*, 15-16. For two notable exceptions, in the Ambrosian rite and the Mozarabic rite, see Mitchell, *Worship*, 75-102; Stevick, *Baptismal Moments*, 13. Daniel Stevick notes that the Syrian church had no postbaptismal anointing at all (Stevick, *Baptismal Moments*, 9).

congregations grew in number, and it was no longer possible for a bishop to preside at the liturgical functions of each. Bishops delegated many of their liturgical functions to presbyters. Among these was baptizing new Christians, in part because the growing emphasis on infant baptism as a remedy for original sin made delaying baptism until a bishop should visit seem risky.²⁴ The Eastern church chose to maintain the initiatory pattern intact, with the baptism proper followed by anointing with chrism consecrated by a bishop, but this necessitated delegating the chrismation and imposition of hands to presbyters. The Western church chose instead to reserve the anointing with chrism and the imposition of hands to bishops, resulting in two separate rites in some places by about the fifth century. This portion of the original initiatory rite was termed “confirmation.”²⁵

This change was uneven, but by the time of the Carolingian reforms of the eighth century, the two rites were quite separate in most of the West. In the mid-eighth century, the *vita* of Boniface referred to the saint appointing a day on his travels “on which he would confirm by the laying-on of hands all the neophytes and those who had recently been baptized.”²⁶ Later scholars debated whether it was the anointing or the imposition of hands that comprised the heart of the rite but agreed that both were the preserve of bishops alone. This was rationalized by several theologians, among them Peter Lombard, who appealed to supposed apostolic origins of the rite to explain the episcopal monopoly.²⁷

The practical problem of the spread of Christianity, which necessitated the partition of the initiatory rite if the anointing and

²⁴ Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1989), 203; Austin, *Rite of Confirmation*, 14-16.

²⁵ Austin, *Rite of Confirmation*, 14-15. Note that instead of locating the origins of confirmation in this postbaptismal anointing and imposition of hands for the conferral of the Holy Spirit (as most liturgiologists argue), Aidan Kavanagh views the imposition of hands as merely an elaborate dismissal of the newly baptized from their baptismal ritual into their first Eucharist. Aidan Kavanagh, *Confirmation: Origins and Reform* (New York: Pueblo Publishing, 1988).

²⁶ Willibald, “The Life of Saint Boniface,” trans. C. H. Talbot, in Thomas F. X. Noble and Thomas Head, eds., *Soldiers of Christ: Saints and Saints’ Lives from Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 135.

²⁷ Peter Lombard, “The Four Books of Sentences,” trans. Owen R. Orr, in Eugene R. Fairweather, ed., *A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham*. Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster Press, 1956), 345.

imposition of hands was an episcopal function, was also roughly paralleled by a shift in the normative age for baptism—a parallel that would confuse later authors as they discussed the rite's function. Judging from the New Testament evidence, infants almost certainly were baptized in the very first decades of the church, but the same evidence makes it clear that they were not the numerical majority.²⁸ In the second century, Tertullian complained about the practice as a novelty, while Origen treated infant baptism as if it were of biblical origin, and Cyprian of Carthage actually favored infant baptism.²⁹ It appears that in the fifth century, the popularity of infant baptism increased.³⁰ By the sixth century, it was expected that candidates for baptism would be infants.³¹ This shift helped to prepare the way for later rationales for confirmation as an adolescent reaffirmation of the promises made for a mute and insensible infant at baptism.

Once confirmation was separated from baptism, it did not serve as a mature affirmation of faith, nor as an endpoint to catechesis, until at least the early modern period. In the middle ages, the normative confirmation candidate, at least in England, was an infant, and it was only with the 1549 Prayer Book that the Church of England required some sort of catechizing prior to confirmation.³² Confirmation was a rarity in the medieval church, despite repeated legislative efforts to require it before communion.³³

In its origins, then, confirmation was a postbaptismal sealing intimately tied to the water-bath itself. It was done by the minister of the

²⁸ New Testament references to the baptism of whole households can be read as supporting the idea of the baptism of young children (for example, Acts 16:33, Acts 18:8, 1 Cor. 1:16 [NRSV]). Henry Chadwick argues that infant baptism was unusual even as late as the mid-fourth century. Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (London: Penguin, 1967), 216.

²⁹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition, 100-600*, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 1 (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 290-292.

³⁰ Johnson, *Rites*, 154, 213-214.

³¹ J. D. C. Fisher and E. J. Yarnold, "Initiation: The West from about A.D. 500 to the Reformation," in C. Jones, G. Wainwright, E. Yarnold, and P. Bradshaw, eds., *The Study of Liturgy*, rev. ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1992), 145.

³² Ann Eljenholm Nichols, *Seeable Signs: The Iconography of the Seven Sacraments, 1350-1544* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1994), 209-213, 216-217; *The Book of Common Prayer* (London, 1549), fol. 135v; First and Second Prayer Books, 251.

³³ Joseph H. Lynch, *The Medieval Church: A Brief History* (London: Longman, 1992), 279; John A. F. Thomson, *The Early Tudor Church and Society, 1485-1529* (London: Longman, 1993), 114; Johnson, *Rites*, 211-212.

baptism—originally the bishop—and done in immediate proximity to the event of the bath. Once confirmation was separated from the baptismal rite, baptismal candidates multiplied in number and diminished in age, and confirmation became the infrequently used preserve of bishops and the infrequently sought rite for infants. For all that legislation sought to encourage the rite, there appears not to have been a widespread effort to enforce it.

In the formative period of Anglicanism, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the age and preparation required of confirmation changed, but the patterns of enforcement remained largely unchanged. The prayer books from 1549 until the 1662 revision ostensibly required confirmation before communion, and the 1662 book required that one be confirmed or “ready and desirous of confirmation,”³⁴ but there are no instances of prosecution of laity for receiving communion prior to confirmation. There are only a very few instances of prosecutions of clergy for failing to prepare and present candidates for confirmation, and all of these were in the period after 1660, when the Church of England asserted confirmation in what amounted to a brand-positioning scheme within the new religious marketplace of post-Civil War England. What the authorities sought to impose in place of confirmation as the prerequisite for full, participatory membership in the church was the requirement of knowledge of the catechism—an effort in which they were successful. The numbers of those confirmed were quite low until the latter half of the seventeenth century. Confirmation—which the authorities tried to repackage as a mature affirmation of faith and an “owning of the covenant,” and even as a pious graduation ceremony after catechizing—was until the very late seventeenth century largely ignored by clergy and laity alike.³⁵

What the historical data shows, then, is that the emphasis Henry Parsley places on the importance of the bishop’s role in formation and initiation simply was not recognized by the church as a whole, nor indeed by Anglicanism as a whole, until the end of the seventeenth century. The emphasis on confirmation as an essential rite of passage was a hiccup in the historical narrative, beginning in the late seventeenth century and lasting only until the late twentieth century—three hundred years out of the roughly two thousand years of the Christian liturgical and catechetical tradition.

³⁴ Brightman, ed., *English Rite*, 2:798-799.

³⁵ See James F. Turrell, “Confirmation, Catechizing, and the Initiation of Adults in the Early Modern Church of England” (Ph.D. diss., Vanderbilt University, 2002).

Not all that is new is bad, to be sure. But the arguments advanced in favor of confirmation in the seventeenth century, and then largely maintained into the twentieth century, are not particularly persuasive to those who want to maintain the early church's idea that baptism constitutes, in the words of the 1979 Prayer Book, "full initiation."³⁶ And there is quite literally no way to do what Kathryn Tanner's essay proposes—to generate a "theological rationale that avoids making confirmation a simple reaffirmation of baptismal vows . . . without in any way jeopardizing baptism's standing as full and complete initiation into the body of Christ."³⁷ Tanner argues that in confirmation, "what is already made real for us at baptism—our becoming one with Christ (Christ's own) and therefore set upon a new way of living—begins to be manifested as our own activity for a whole new way of life at confirmation."³⁸ Yet the vows made in baptism, in the baptismal covenant, promise that this new way of life starts at once, with the sacrament of baptism.³⁹ Tanner argues that confirmation marks a "decisive shift in our lives," and yet it is the liturgical rite of baptism where Episcopalians locate the renunciation of evil and sin and the embrace of Jesus Christ as Lord. In the present rite of confirmation, we merely "reaffirm" the renunciation and "renew" our commitment to Christ.⁴⁰ If liturgical language matters at all—if *lex orandi* has any role in the formulation of *lex credendi*—then Tanner's arguments cannot be supported. Indeed, even from the level of observable phenomenon, the initiation of adults (which is the liturgical norm from which the baptismal rite of the 1979 Prayer Book takes its shape) undercuts Tanner's claims. Adults seeking baptism have, if anything, already begun to manifest their commitment to Christ while in the catechumenate. This is why both the Roman Catholic Church and the Episcopal Church quite explicitly include catechumens within the household of faith.⁴¹ Only in the case of those baptized as infants can one argue that the manifestation of faith is not visibly present at the moment of baptism. Yet well in advance of the age

³⁶ BCP 1979, 298.

³⁷ Tanner, "Towards a New Theology," 33; *ATR* 88: 86.

³⁸ Tanner, "Towards a New Theology," 34; *ATR* 88: 86.

³⁹ BCP 1979, 304-305.

⁴⁰ Tanner, "Towards a New Theology," 34; *ATR* 88: 86; BCP 1979, 302-303, 415.

⁴¹ *RCIA*, 20; Aidan Kavanagh, "Catechesis: Formation in Stages," in Michael W. Merriman, ed., *The Baptismal Mystery and the Catechumenate* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1990), 43-44; Aidan Kavanagh, *The Shape of Baptism: The Rite of Christian Initiation* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1978; reprint, Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1991), 130; *The Book of Occasional Services 2003* (New York: Church Publishing, 2004), 116.

of confirmation, children at a very young age are capable of living out their baptisms, showing evidence of both faith and moral behavior.⁴² Finally, Tanner subordinates baptism to confirmation when she states, "Baptism lays the foundation for and gestures toward what confirmation concerns."⁴³ Tanner's theological rationale for confirmation flies in the face of what is said by the liturgical texts of baptism and confirmation themselves. Further, Tanner's proffered rationale ignores current thinking about the catechumenate, and it subordinates the chief sacrament of the church (baptism) to a medieval aberration (the freestanding rite of confirmation).

These errors of Tanner's article aside, the report contains other elements that are disturbing to those who study initiation, not least the survey of bishops' opinions and practices concerning the rite. Many liturgics scholars wish that *Prayer Book Studies 18* had ended confirmation, or if nothing else that we had resorted to the rite of reaffirmation found in *Prayer Book Studies 26*, which fit with Terry Holmes's interpretation of confirmation as a repeatable "rite of intensification."⁴⁴ But the 1979 Prayer Book at least was clear that baptism was the preeminent initiatory rite and that confirmation was a subordinate, pastoral rite lacking the sacramental character of baptism.

⁴² One component of the baptismal covenant is participating in the faith and worship of the church. On the religious intuition of children, their capacity for faith, and their capacity for worship, see Sophia Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child: Experiencing Scripture and Liturgy with Young Children*, trans. Patricia M. Coulter and Julie M. Coulter (Chicago, Ill.: Liturgy Training Publications, 1992), 21-45, 151-156. On the capacity of children to engage in worship, see also the Roman Catholic Church's "The Directory for Masses with Children," in Gabe Huck, ed., *Leader's Manual: Hymnal for Catholic Students* (Chicago, Ill.: Liturgy Training Publications, 1989), 111-112. The other component of the baptismal covenant is moral behavior. Moral understanding emerges in the preschool years. Young children begin to show evidence of distinguishing good and bad before age two, and they develop a sense of guilt at a similarly early age. See Teresa M. McDevitt and Jeanne Ellis Ormrod, *Child Development: Educating and Working with Children and Adolescents*, 2nd ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson, 2004), 437-439, 444; Judy Dunn, "The Beginnings of Moral Understanding: Development in the Second Year," in Jerome Kagan and Sharon Lamb, eds., *The Emergence of Morality in Young Children* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 91-112; Catherine Snow, "Comment: Language and the Beginnings of Moral Understanding," in Kagan and Lamb, eds., *Emergence of Morality*, 112-122.

⁴³ Tanner, "Towards a New Theology," 43; *ATR* 88: 94.

⁴⁴ Urban T. Holmes, "Confirmation as a Rite of Intensification: A Response to J. Robert Wright," *Anglican Theological Review* 57, no. 1 (January 1975): 73. Lee Mitchell concurs (Leonel L. Mitchell, "Christian Initiation, Rites of Passage, and Confirmation," in Cully, ed., *Confirmation Re-Examined*, 86, 89).

Further, the church has clearly articulated a standard concerning who is to be confirmed and who is to be received when persons of other faith traditions come into the Episcopal Church. The canons may at points depart from the prayer book rubrics, but they are the interpretation that the General Convention has put on the question of reception versus confirmation. Sadly, this relative clarity seems not to have made an impression on a number of the bishops.

The survey of bishops' liturgical practices shows that 42 of 101 respondents use chrism in confirmation, in the absence of anything in the Prayer Book authorizing, or even anticipating, its use in confirmation.⁴⁵ Against the anticipated reply that nothing in the book prohibits this, it must be remembered that proscriptive rubrics are exceedingly rare in liturgical texts. Chrism belongs in the baptismal rite, where it was restored by the 1979 Prayer Book as part of the overall reconfiguration of baptism along early church lines. In the current Prayer Book, there is no rationale for a separate chrismation as part of confirmation.

More discouraging still is the large number of bishops who have failed to recognize what the canons say about whom to confirm and whom to receive. Whatever one may say about the canons, they are significantly at odds with the self-reported procedures of a number of bishops. At times, the format of the survey invites terse answers that elide the subtle distinctions of the canons. Canon I.17.1.d states that an adult who was baptized by a bishop and received the imposition of hands within the 1979 baptismal rite is to be considered confirmed. Yet in their responses, several bishops did not distinguish these persons from others baptized as adults, whom they would confirm. Typical responses to the question, "How do you distinguish who is to be confirmed?" included "Those who have been baptized during their infancy or adults or may come from another place" and "Baptized and educated in Christian faith."⁴⁶

More serious by far is the practice of confirming those whom the canons suggest should be received. Canon III.17.1.c states, "Those who have previously made a mature public commitment in another Church may be received by the laying on of hands by a Bishop of this Church, rather than confirmed." Resolution 2003-A085 at General Convention 2003 reiterated the position of Canon III.17.1.c as it

⁴⁵ "Questionnaire Responses by the House of Bishops Spring Meeting 2005," in *Forming Christians*, 70-73.

⁴⁶ "Questionnaire Responses," 74-75.

applies to persons coming to the Episcopal Church from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, allowing for their reception rather than re-confirmation. Yet numerous bishops limit reception to those confirmed by a bishop in another tradition, a more restrictive standard than that of the canons.⁴⁷ Some might claim that they are simply following the stricter standard set by the Prayer Book, which states that confirmation is for those who have not (1) made a mature public affirmation of faith, and (2) received the imposition of hands by a bishop.⁴⁸ But typical responses overlook the multifaceted practices of different denominations. One respondent receives only “Lutheran, Orthodox, and R[oman] C[atholic]” Christians. But the strict Prayer Book directions cannot be cited to defend this practice, for Lutherans allow pastors to confirm, the Orthodox do not have a distinct rite of confirmation, and the Roman Catholics allow any baptizing presbyter to confirm immediately those baptized as adults, while presbyters with special faculties may confirm those baptized as infants.⁴⁹ Other replies further confound the reader’s attempt to square them with either the canons or the more restrictive directions in the Prayer Book. One respondent receives “baptized folk from churches within the catholic faith,” and another receives those “baptized in other confirming, protestant traditions,” while still another receives those “baptized in a tradition in apostolic succession,” but not one of the three looks for the prior, mature affirmation of faith required by both canon and Prayer Book for reception to take place.⁵⁰ The practices reported by many bishops, in determining whom to confirm and whom to receive, bear little or no relation to the canons or the Prayer Book. Given that what one does teaches no less than what one says, this failure of several bishops to conform their practices to the Prayer Book and/or canons undermines the authority of those formularies of the church, even if the bishops concerned almost certainly do not intend this.

What, then, should the church do? One option would be to embrace the proposals of *Prayer Book Studies 18*. This would entail

⁴⁷ “Questionnaire Responses,” 75-77.

⁴⁸ BCP 1979, 412.

⁴⁹ On Lutherans and Roman Catholics, see the discussion above. In the Orthodox Church, chrismation, administered by the presbyter, follows immediately after baptism for both adults and children and therefore does not constitute a separate, free-standing rite of confirmation (W. Jardine Grisbrooke, “Initiation: The Byzantine Rite,” in Jones et al., eds., *Study of Liturgy*, 153-154).

⁵⁰ “Questionnaire Responses,” in *Forming Christians*, 76.

ending the rite of confirmation, name and thing. Candidates, regardless of age or understanding, would be baptized in the water-bath, receive the imposition of hands and chrismation by a presbyter, and then receive the Eucharist, completing their initiation. The church would abolish confirmation, together with its cognates, reception and reaffirmation. This would have several admirable effects. It would clarify that the ancient rite of water-bath and handlaying with chrismation had been restored in our baptismal rite, thus making consistent our theology and practice. The uninterrupted sequence of baptism-sealing-first communion would underscore the theology of grace that lies behind the sacraments: we do not receive either the Holy Spirit or the Eucharist because of our own inherent merit, cognitive development, or chronological age. Finally, omitting any particular rite of reaffirmation would underscore that regular participation in the Eucharist is in itself sufficient renewal of baptism and profession of faith.

This may overlook a certain pastoral benefit to having a non-mandatory rite of reaffirmation available. A second and less radical option would be to distinguish the pastoral and theological functions of the present confirmation practice and to frame our practice to minister to pastoral needs. Within the present prayer book liturgies, confirmation, name and thing, would be abolished, as would the rite of reception, while the rite of reaffirmation of baptismal vows would be retained for those who wanted either a way to mark their return to the church after some time spent away, or a ritualization of a turn in their spiritual journey to Christ. The rite of reaffirmation as currently configured is optional, is infinitely repeatable, and does not connote any giving of the Spirit. It is available for use at various points in the individual's spiritual journey, as he or she lives into his or her baptism, thus overcoming the significant limitations on the nonrepeatable act of confirmation.⁵¹ The present Prayer Book might be used, more or less happily, until the next revision, at which point the form of confirmation and the form of reception could be excised, leaving only the rite of reaffirmation (and the shape of initiation in *Prayer Book Studies* 26). This is not such radical surgery, after all: the only liturgical variant to distinguish the action being performed is the formula used by the bishop at the handlaying. Otherwise, in structural terms,

⁵¹ Frederick Wolf, former bishop of Maine, noted these limitations. See Frederick B. Wolf, "Christian Initiation" in H. Barry Evans, ed., *Prayer Book Renewal: Worship and the New Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 41.

confirmation, reception, and reaffirmation are identical in the present rite.⁵² One supposes that the role of presiding at the reformed rite might even be restricted to bishops, although it also might readily and appropriately be delegated to the presbyters who have been involved in the candidates' catechetical formation.⁵³ Claims that the bishop operates, in this context, as Father or Mother in God of the local church and a symbolic representative of the larger church may have some validity.⁵⁴ But the claim, too frequently made, that episcopal confirmation can maintain unity in a diocese or overcome creeping congregationalism in the Episcopal Church is too much for the data to bear.⁵⁵ For this proposal to avoid undermining our baptismal theology, the canons would need to be updated to omit all references to "confirmed" members, particularly when they serve to restrict access to leadership positions and the ordination process.⁵⁶ And the retained rite of reaffirmation ought not be called, even in a subtitle, "confirmation."⁵⁷

The reality is that the present age is rather different from that of the medieval church, which normativized infant baptism. The

⁵² BCP 1979, 418-419; Stevick, *Baptismal Moments*, 146.

⁵³ Lee Mitchell would be more restrictive, reserving the rite to presbyters specially licensed by the bishop, but the RCIA's emphasis on the parish pastor's confirming seems more appropriate. This rite of reaffirmation is not a medieval oath of fealty to the bishop, but a public affirmation of faith in the midst of the liturgical assembly, after appropriate formation. It seems apt to have the presbyter responsible for that assembly and that formation preside as a matter of pastoral charge, rather than to have a presbyter from outside, licensed by an unseen bishop, perform the task. See Leonel L. Mitchell, "What Shall We Do about Confirmation?" in Ruth A. Meyers, ed., *A Prayer Book for the 21st Century* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1996), 108. See Kavanagh, *Confirmation*, 89, 96 for a different justification for the parish pastor's role in RCIA.

⁵⁴ For example, see Mitchell, "Theology of Christian Initiation," 413.

⁵⁵ For the appeal to unity, see J. Robert Wright, "Prayer Book Studies 26: Considered Objections," *Anglican Theological Review* 57, no. 1 (January 1975): 61, 66, 71. For the anticongregational claim, see Donald Parsons, "Some Theological and Pastoral Implications of Confirmation," in Cully, ed., *Confirmation Re-Examined*, 51.

⁵⁶ This is the opposite set of conclusions from those reached by J. Robert Wright, and rather close to those reached by Terry Holmes (Wright, "Prayer Book Studies 26: Considered Objections," 70; Holmes, "Confirmation as a Rite of Intensification," 72-78).

⁵⁷ The drafting committee for *Prayer Book Studies* 26 had hoped to delete the term, but allowed it back in as a subtitle, opening the way for the successive advancement of the term by stages, until it became the primary title for the present rite (Daniel Stevick, "The Liturgics of Confirmation," in Cully, ed., *Confirmation Re-Examined*, 77).

prevailing culture cannot be trusted to handle the work of forming Christians. That work must be done within the church, through such mechanisms as the catechumenate, which although intended for the preparation of adults for baptism has been profitably adapted in many places for the formation of baptized adults.⁵⁸ Because infant baptism remains the statistical norm (even as we hold adult baptism to be the liturgical norm that gives shape and meaning to the rite), we face the problem of how to form Christians baptized as infants. Postbaptismal catechesis is a necessity, for all ages, and that catechesis is probably best done through a process like that of the catechumenate, with its emphasis on formation over education, more narrowly defined. The catechumenal process for those already baptized—whether we want to call them “catechumens” or not—might appropriately culminate in the rite of reaffirmation.

Additionally, the learnings available to us from the field of social psychology suggest that the public embrace of a view, position, or identity in fact strengthens the vigor with which one holds that view, position, or identity, in part due to the desire to be, or at least to appear, consistent.⁵⁹ A public rite of owning one’s baptismal covenant, as the seventeenth-century Anglican divines put it, could serve a useful function on this level, provided that it were to happen at the individual’s initiative and after appropriate formation. All of this can be accomplished by the rite of reaffirmation as it currently exists in the Prayer Book. Formation, the concern in the report that is taken to justify a return to older practices of confirmation, is no doubt important. But confirmation should not be used, as Aidan Kavanagh put it, to “coerce a required amount of exposure to educational and catechetical programs. . . . While education and therapy doubtless need to be done, these endeavors must not be allowed to reinterpret the sacraments and alter their integrated liturgical sequence.”⁶⁰ We must not

⁵⁸ See *Book of Occasional Services 2003*, 114, 136. Not all dioceses and parishes distinguish sharply between those seeking baptism and those seeking confirmation/reception/reaffirmation. See Michael W. Merriman, “Introduction,” in Merriman, ed., *Baptismal Mystery*, 12-13; Roger J. White, “The Role of the Bishop in Christian Initiation,” in Merriman, ed., *Baptismal Mystery*, 98, 100-101, 107-108; but compare Mitchell, *Worship*, 130, 148.

⁵⁹ Robert B. Cialdini, *Influence: Science and Practice*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper-Collins, 1988), 61, 68-91. See also Hazel Marcus and R. B. Zajonc, “The Cognitive Perspective in Social Psychology,” in Gardner Lindzey and Elliot Aronson, eds., *Handbook of Social Psychology*, 3rd ed. (New York: Random House, 1985), 202-203.

⁶⁰ Kavanagh, *Confirmation*, 110.

let laudable goals of catechetical formation and the public affirmation of Christian faith muddy the waters of baptism by calling the resulting rite “confirmation,” or by implying that the Spirit is conveyed in any particular way.

Such learned liturgiologists as Lee Mitchell and Ruth Meyers appear to allow for the second approach that I have sketched. Mitchell, for example, notes that “for those baptized in infancy,” the act of reaffirmation of baptismal vows (even if misleadingly called confirmation) “is both theologically significant and pastorally necessary. . . . It ritualizes the ‘owning’ by the individual of the faith in which he or she was baptized.”⁶¹ Meyers argues, “The term ‘confirmation’ must be eliminated. It has had too many meanings historically to enable further reinterpretation.” But she also sees a role for a rite of reaffirmation: “Eliminating confirmation, or any other *expected* rite of mature affirmation of faith, would remove an emphasis on the first occasion of affirmation and suggest that rites of renewal may be appropriate at various times in an individual’s life.”⁶²

This approach would meet the desires of some for a public rite of passage—or perhaps better, a rite of intensification—into maturity in the faith. In contrast to the historic practice of confirmation, such a rite should be reserved to those who are mature, that is, capable of abstract thinking, engaged in the work of sorting out their identities, and involved in the process of self-differentiating from family and community of origin, around ages 18 to 25. The frequently observed pattern of “confirmation” in adolescence would appear to do nothing for the ostensible goal of eliciting a mature faith commitment from individuals.⁶³

Whether the rite of confirmation/reception/reaffirmation will be eliminated entirely, or pared back to a single, repeatable act of reaffirmation, or left “as is” to further confound observers and confuse

⁶¹ Mitchell, “Christian Initiation, Rites of Passage, and Confirmation,” 88.

⁶² Ruth A. Meyers, *Continuing the Reformation: Re-Visioning Baptism in the Episcopal Church* (New York: Church Publishing, 1997), 247. See also Marion J. Hatchett, “Unfinished Business in Prayer Book Revision” in Paul V. Marshall and Lesley Northup, eds., *Leaps and Boundaries: The Prayer Book in the 21st Century* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Morehouse Publishing, 1997), 19, for another reasoned proposal to do away with the name “confirmation.”

⁶³ Holmes, “Confirmation as a Rite of Intensification,” 75; John Westerhoff, “Aspects of Adult Confirmation,” in Cully, ed., *Confirmation Re-Examined*, 111. But Westerhoff’s interpretation of confirmation as a rite to “‘ordain’ adults for their ministry in church and society” (Westerhoff, “Aspects,” 115) must be resisted vigorously. The rite of baptism, with its baptismal covenant, is the full, perfect, and sufficient commissioning of the laity for their ministry in the world.

believers, one cannot readily predict. But what is apparent is that the present system of nonrepeatable confirmation and repeatable reaffirmation is a muddle. The report of the Theology Committee makes no serious attempt, beyond Joe Burnett's admirable essay, to engage with the learnings of professional scholars of liturgics. The self-reported, present practices of a number of bishops fail to constitute a model of appropriate initiatory theology and practice. The Episcopal Church needs to reengage seriously with the proposals of *Prayer Book Studies* 18 and 26.

