

What's confirmation for? A rite needing revision

by [Martin B. Copenhaver](#) in the [June 2, 2009](#) issue

Until recently, it was the practice of the congregation I serve for the members of the confirmation class, most of them ninth graders, to write individual statements of faith. In those statements the youth were asked to say what they believe about God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. In reading newsletters from other congregations, I have noticed that this is a common practice.

In our congregation the statements were written with great ceremony at a retreat that was held the month of confirmation Sunday. During the service of confirmation a number of those who were about to be confirmed read their statements to the congregation. Typically, some statements were somewhat stumbling attempts to capture these enduring mysteries, while others could only be called statements of doubt. The congregation would receive each with the lavish appreciation and praise of a parent who has just been presented with a child's first drawing.

One year, when the statements were particularly eloquent and seemed to bear startlingly accurate witness to the God who is worshiped in that sanctuary each Sunday, a member of the congregation said, without irony, "After listening to those beautiful statements, God must be feeling especially good today"—as if the God who hung the stars in the heavens and set the earth in its orbit had spent a sleepless Saturday night anxiously awaiting the verdict that would be rendered by a group of 15-year-olds the next morning.

Over the years I have come to realize that I am just not that interested in a 15-year-old's reflection on eternal matters. In fact, I think we do youths a disservice by implying that they have anything important to say on such things at that point in their lives. Doing so may only create more adults who are overly infatuated with their own opinions.

The proper focus of the rite of confirmation is not on what any individual believes but on what the church affirms. The church is rightly interested in knowing whether someone will confirm vows made on their behalf at baptism. But it is telling, I think, that we do not ask a person who is about to be baptized, "Before we baptize you,

will you tell us what you have concluded about God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit?"

So now, at least, we ask a different question of young people before they are confirmed: "Do you want to be a follower of Jesus Christ?" Although this calls for a more devotional response, it too has its problems. After all, most of the youth are at the precise point in their lives when they are questioning everything, a time when everything seems up for grabs. They are in the midst of negotiating that slippery, uncertain transition between having a secondhand faith and claiming a firsthand faith. It is, in short, precisely the wrong time to ask them what they believe. Much of our work with younger teenagers can be an attempt to answer questions that they have not yet asked. No wonder many of them evidence little interest in playing along: Is there anything more annoying than someone who insists on scratching when as yet there is no itch?

In some respects confirmation is a rite in search of a meaning. Originally, the term referred to a bishop's anointing and laying hands on candidates after they had been baptized. First the candidates were baptized, then they were brought to the bishop to have their baptism confirmed. When bishops became overseers of multiple congregations, people were baptized by local priests, and only later were these baptisms confirmed by the bishop when he visited the local parish. The medieval church made confirmation a separate rite and, in some instances, a sacrament in itself.

Over time, this separation of baptism and confirmation created its own problems. When the two are divided, baptism can become a kind of provisional act conferring a halfway membership. Then, too, when confirmation is understood apart from baptism, the emphasis is mistakenly placed on a confirmand's qualifications rather than on God's unqualified gift. In such an understanding, confirmation is no longer about the church confirming a person's baptism. Instead, it becomes an opportunity for the individual to confirm—or not—what the church has done in baptism.

If we are to have something like confirmation—if, indeed, baptism is not sufficient—we need to consider why we choose a particular time in a person's life to perform the rite. Whatever the historical reasons may be, these days we seem to confirm young people because we are afraid that it may be our last chance to lay some claim on them before they leave the fold. And leave the fold many of them will, for a time at least. At such a time, confirmation cannot help but resemble a graduation ceremony—complete with special outfits, valedictory addresses,

presentation of certificates, parties and gifts.

Perhaps the rite should be celebrated in a way that communicates more clearly the expectation that people at that stage of their lives may not be ready or willing to make confirmation vows. Instead of asking young people to confirm the vows made at their baptisms, perhaps this is an opportunity for the church simply to confirm the vows they made at baptism—confirming the validity of those vows and the congregation’s love and commitment to the youth, no matter what they may believe at the moment or where life may take them. The candidates for confirmation simply would be asked to receive the love of the congregation and a recommitment of what the congregation offered them at their baptisms. Even if, after such a ritual, the youth leave the church, as many will, those commitments would be like a light kept in the window until they are ready to return home.

Or perhaps we need to abandon the idea of a normative age for confirmation. After all, in many traditions, including my own, we affirm that there is no normative time for baptism. If we want individuals to confirm vows made on their behalf at baptism, a more natural time for such confirmation may be when someone returns to church as a young adult. When I ask folks coming to the congregation to say a word about their pilgrimage of faith, often their responses follow a familiar pattern: “I went to church school and was confirmed. I was even active in my high school youth group for a time. But then I left home. Well, you know, I just never got connected with a church after that. Now I’m coming back with my children. I thought I was coming for them. I wanted them to get some answers to the questions they were asking. But now I realize that there is another child, the one within me, who wants to grow. So I am ready to recommit myself.”

A service of confirmation would have great power for people in that kind of circumstance. It would not resemble a graduation ceremony so much as another kind of celebration—a joyous homecoming.