

The Importance of Confirmation

A well-known Lutheran preacher once told of a Bishop who visited a confirmation class and asked a student to recite the Apostle's Creed. The particular student he asked had difficulty memorizing.

So all he could remember was a phrase from the Third Article, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins."

The Bishop asked him to try again, but all that he remembered was, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins,"

After a number of attempts with the same result, the Bishop suddenly realized a great truth. With tears filling his eyes he said to the embarrassed student, "Son, that's just fine. That's about all I have learned, too, and that is enough!"

How important is confirmation? What are we trying to accomplish by it? Confirmation is important because of the material presented and the instruction given; because of the strategic time in young peoples' lives; and because it gives the pastor the opportunity to serve as a shepherd for the young people. Through confirmation we are trying to help our young people believe in the forgiveness of sins.

1. Confirmation is important because of the material used and instruction given. The Explanation of Luther's Small Catechism teaches of the Christian faith and life. The catechism includes the Ten Commandments which reveal God's Law; the Apostles' Creed that declares the Gospel; the Lord's Prayer that shows the Christian how to pray; and the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper which are the means God uses, along with His Word, to bring people into His kingdom of grace and to support and strengthen them.

The catechism helps young people gain an understanding of how God works in their lives. It shows them the Law so that they will be convicted of their sin, and shows them the Gospel so that they will be given faith in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sin. It helps them face the reality of the two natures present in the Christian believer—the old and new natures—and helps them understand the struggle that a Christian can have between these two natures.

Many Christians misunderstand and have spiritual difficulties because they do not understand the tension between these two natures. Some think that to be a Christian is to be free from any desire to sin and that good Christians do not sin. This does not mean that Christians have a license to sin. However, believers need to understand that the old nature does not die or go away once a person is a Christian.

The church needs to help people, and especially its young people, see Jesus and His grace and love for them so that He may draw them away from sin more and more. The preaching and teaching of the church need to be clear about what the Apostle Paul wrote about in Romans 7. Here Paul finds himself struggling with sinful desires. The good he realizes he should do, he does not do. He confesses his sinfulness and finds his only hope in Jesus Christ.

I do not understand what I do; for I don't do what I would like to do, but instead I do what I hate. Since what I do is what I don't want to do, this shows that I agree that the Law is right. So I am not really the one who does this thing; rather it is the sin that lives in me. I know that good does not live in me—that is, in my human nature. For even though the desire to do good is in me, I am not able to do it. I don't do the good I want to do; instead, I do the evil that I do not want to do. If I do what I don't want to do, this means that I am no longer the one who does it; instead, it is the sin that lives in me. Romans 7:15-20

2. Confirmation is important because it takes place in the early teen years when many young people begin to struggle to find assurance of salvation. Their faith is in the process of maturing. It is a time when they consciously believe what their parents and the church have been teaching them.

During this period, young people will have doubts and questions. There may be periods of confusion and rebellion. Many want to be Christians but they do not feel as if they are. They desire to live the Christian life but feel that they will miss too much fun and freedom if they do so. Confirmation is a time when their questions and doubts may be expressed and thoughtful biblical answers given. The pastor, in these classes of instruction, plainly teaches that assurance of salvation is not based on their feelings or experiences but rather on the Word of God and what Jesus did for them by His life and death. The young people are taught that they are not Christians because they feel like Christians or because they live perfect lives, but because Jesus has given them faith and they can, moment by moment, live in that gift. They are taught that assurance is a matter of faith in what God has done for them in Christ, not what they do for Him and not what they feel.

*My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus' blood and righteousness;
I dare not trust the sweetest frame,
But wholly lean on Jesus' name;*

*On Christ, the solid rock, I stand;
All other ground is sinking sand*
—Edward Mote

3. Confirmation is also important because this time of instruction gives the pastor an opportunity to shepherd young people in the congregation by helping them learn to know God. This shepherding is done best by example. It is a joyful privilege for pastors to function in this way. As the Apostle John said, “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth” (3 John 4).

- When the young people come to know a pastor who is open and loving, understanding and caring, they will have a chance to see how the Christian life should be lived.
- When they see a pastor who acknowledges his own need to a Savior, they will see how to acknowledge their need of a Savior.
- When they see a pastor who talks to them about his own struggles and fears, they will see how to face their struggles and fears.

“Christianity,” says John Stott, “is a rescue religion.” This is what the church wants to teach its young people in its confirmation instructions program.

As the young people are confirmed, the church prays that each person confirmed may have come to assurance of salvation and believe in the forgiveness of sins. Of course, even after Confirmation Day, there will be spiritual struggles. Some may also wonder if they want to continue to be Christians. Nevertheless, God promises that He will continue to work through the Word that has been taught.

God invites those confirmands who profess faith in Jesus, no matter how weak that faith may be, to join the congregation at the Lord’s Table. All believers are encouraged to partake often to be “strengthened and preserved in true faith.” The Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper declares the forgiveness of sins to those who partake of the broken body and shed blood of Christ.

May God bless the young people during this time of confirmation instruction and as they come to their Confirmation Day. May God also bless the pastors in their worthwhile work of shepherding the young people of the congregation.

—Dale R. Hanson
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