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## Confirmation: Origins and Reform

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backed by solid primary research and much literary talent, should stimulate a fundamental re-assessment of conventional social gospel wisdom. Richard Allen's monumental work *The Social Passion* highlighted "the progressives", as he called them, both Methodist and Presbyterian. Using extensive quoted material he praised effusively such men as S.D. Chown, T.A. Moore and J.G. Shearer, and he did so at the expense of such radicals as J.S. Woodsworth and William Ivens. For his part, Fraser goes beyond the public rhetoric to underlying values (with their limitations) and social analysis. Fraser recognizes and acknowledges that words have their incarnation in programmatic and social reality, and he demonstrates quite clearly the middle-class tunnel vision of his protagonists. In this respect, his book is superior to and more nuanced than the earlier work of Allen's. Fraser has pushed the social gospel debate forward in a most significant way, and for that, both the ecclesiastical and academic world owe him a debt of gratitude.

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### **Confirmation: Origins and Reform**

Aidan Kavanagh

New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1988

xi + 137 pp. \$18.75

When the king heard the book being read, he tore his clothes in dismay... (2 Chronicles 34:17, TEV).

This is an important book. Although Lutherans who read it will not likely tear their clothes in dismay, those from traditions where confirmation is considered a sacrament, if they accept Kavanagh's thesis, may be so inclined.

Kavanagh claims to have made a radical and far-reaching discovery. What we now call "confirmation", he proposes, originated simply as a dismissal blessing which concluded the early Christian baptismal liturgy. This blessing adds nothing to baptism, but only completes this part of the initiation rite. The episcopal "confirmation prayer" which we know most commonly from the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus, paragraph 21, is not an epiclesis but only a dismissal. This, Kavanagh claims, shifts the emphasis on the imparting of the Holy Spirit in baptism away from the acts of consignation and imposition of hands, keeping it in the liturgies of baptism and eucharist where it belongs.

The fact at issue, he says, is whether there can be, or is, such a dismissal as a "liturgical unity in the evolution of Christian worship" (4). Kavanagh

believes that such is the case, and refers to a number of other such dismissals recorded in early Christian writings. As examples, he cites the *Council of Laodicea* (345–365), the *Apostolic Constitutions* (370–380), the *Travels of Egeria* (381–384), Augustine, Ambrose, monastic practises, and the 4th–5th century *Prayers of Inclination* from Gaul and North Africa, concluding that the *Apostolic Tradition's* rite for dismissal of catechumens represents “an early instance of the Christian instinct to ‘seal’ a unit of worshipful activity by a final address to God in prayer, and by physical contact with the Presiding Minister” (8).

Much of his argument focuses on Hippolytus’ *Apostolic Tradition (AT)*, paragraph 21. This is the earliest account there is of what we now know as *confirmation*. Kavanagh suggests that *AT 21* is speaking about the movement from font to table. The impact of his argument hinges on the fact that there are *two* versions of this episcopal prayer. In the older “Verona” text, there is no epiclesis of the Holy Spirit, but a simple association of the Spirit with Baptism.

This is not an entirely new suggestion, and was made a number of years ago by Lampe in his book “The Seal of the Spirit”. Other scholars, among them Dix and Botte, disagree with Kavanagh and Lampe, who say that this prayer is simply part of the dismissal rite, through which the newly-baptized are set into the public ministry of the whole people of God. As such, they say, it imparts no special gift of the Holy Spirit, but is a sealing rite.

Kavanagh explains how *AT 21* has influenced the subsequent Roman rite of initiation through the 8th century Gelasian Sacramentary, which in time came to be interpreted as the authoritative source for the sacrament of confirmation. He lays the blame for this at the feet of Pope Innocent I (d. 417), who began the process of regularizing all European liturgies according to the Roman rite, and demanded that post-baptismal anointings always be conducted by a bishop. Kavanagh speculates that, sometime between *AT 21* (215 c.e.) and the death of Innocent I, the “Lord God” prayer was altered to become an epiclesis of the Holy Spirit. Thus, where the Verona version has “send upon them your grace”, the Gelasian Sacramentary has “pour upon them, Lord, your Holy Spirit, the Paraclete”.

Kavanagh believes this happened between 350 c.e. and 416 c.e. for several reasons: the threat of Arianism, the rising frequency of presbyteral presidency at the sacraments, and the concern over the role of the Spirit in baptism, led to this transference to the bishop of the exclusive power to sign the Spirit over to the baptized individual. He interprets this as an example of bending liturgy to meet theology and pastoral need, and observes that “in the history of liturgical development, structure often outlives meaning” (63).

On the basis of this argument, he calls into question some of the presuppositions that have been made about confirmation, and claims to establish these points:

- 1 What is called *confirmation* in the Eastern Rite is NOT confirmation at all, but simply a post-baptismal chrismation: there is in fact NO CONFIRMATION RITE in Eastern usage.

- 2 There was no dismissal structure in the non-Roman, Mozarabic, and Gallican baptismal liturgies, but only a post-baptismal chrismation such as the Eastern Rite had.
- 3 Modern confirmation shows a three-stage development, from the *AT 21*'s episcopal *missa*, to Innocent I's expansion of this, to the merging of this Roman practise with the Spanish and Gallican concern with episcopal oversight in the 6th to 9th centuries.

In the second part of the book, Kavanagh explores the implications of his argument for the reform of confirmation in the Roman church today. Vatican II reaffirmed that all three initiatory sacraments (baptism, confirmation, and eucharist) are related in this sequence, and are necessary for initiation: this normal order should not be violated. There should be no separation of baptism from confirmation, but also no eucharist offered before confirmation. Any other arrangement is abnormal, and gives an alien valence to whatever step in the sequence is changed. An implication of this, Kavanagh points out, is that presbyters must now normally confirm.

Commenting on Paul VI's *Apostolic Constitution* (which, he claims, was written largely by Botte), Kavanagh observes that here, anointing/sealing is identified as the essence of confirmation, and NOT the imposition of hands. This, he says, implies a radical change in the rite of confirmation: "The matter and form of Roman confirmation have been Byzantinized, as has confirmation's place in the baptismal liturgy for adults and older children, and its usual minister, a presbyter....confirmation structurally has been given up in all but name in the case of adults and children of catechetical age, but is retained as a separate structure for those baptized as infants" (93).

If this present practise continues, he sees the danger of confirmation becoming almost two different sacraments: a baptismal/transformational pattern and an educational/prophylactic pattern. This would violate the Council's intention to re-unify the three sacraments of initiation. He then suggests three possible scenarios for the future:

- 1 Baptism and eucharist could be seen as the main sacraments, with confirmation as simply the Roman way of linking these two.
- 2 Confirmation could be altogether abolished as a "confusing mistake" (112).
- 3 Confirmation could be brought back into close proximity with baptism, making it like the Byzantine post-baptismal chrismation, and performing it even on infants.

It is challenging to evaluate Kavanagh's arguments from a Lutheran perspective. His proposal that confirmation is simply a post-baptismal dismissal hinges largely on textual criticism of *AT 21*, and on his assumption that the Verona prayer is the authentic and original of the two versions given in all critical editions. This raises to prominence what we all know, but in practical terms have ignored; that the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus as we have it today is a synthetic document, and ought not to be relied upon as heavily as it is by liturgiologists for teaching that "this is

the way Romans worshiped, baptized, and ordained in the second century". All three critical editions in use today, those of Botte, Dix, and Cuming, make this point evident. With this in mind, we conclude that the jury is still out with regard to Kavanagh's interpretation of *AT 21*.

Should Kavanagh's thesis eventually be proved correct and accepted by the churches, then traditions in which confirmation is considered a sacrament will truly rend their theological and liturgical garments. For Romans, Anglicans, and the Orthodox, the theology of initiation will change significantly. However, in the Reformed churches, where confirmation is a utilitarian rite which can be taken or left and which bears no essential relation to initiation or salvation, Kavanagh's suggestions will not be so earth-shattering.

Still, at this time when Lutherans are placing their own sacramental practises under close scrutiny, sooner or later we will be forced to examine confirmation as well. In the early 1970s, we accepted the definition of confirmation as "a pastoral and educational ministry of the church that is designed to help baptized children identify with the life and mission of the adult Christian community, and that is celebrated in a public rite." But we gave little thought to the nature and significance of the "public rite". Then, in 1977, the *Lutheran Book of Worship* removed the Prayer of Epiclesis from the Rite of Confirmation and placed it within the Rite of Holy Baptism, without actually calling this confirmation, or eliminating the Rite of Confirmation. (It is interesting that the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod's 1982 *Lutheran Worship* retained the earlier Lutheran practise, and is thus closely aligned with the pre-Vatican II practise of the Roman Church!) And so we Lutherans are not so far outside this discussion as we might think.

Kavanagh has helped clarify and bring into prominence one of the perennial problems in our theology and liturgies of initiation. And his assertion that Orthodox "confirmation" is not confirmation at all, but simply post-baptismal anointing, may help to clear the ecumenical air somewhat, especially when the debate turns to who confirms whom, and how. For when churches today begin to reform their own practises, they inevitably compare what they are doing with what other churches have done and are doing. And if we can agree to stop calling the Orthodox post-baptismal anointing "confirmation", as Kavanagh suggests, then we have clarified something important in ecumenical discussion.

In all of this, however, it is still not clear what *confirmation* is or means. There are many definitions of what confirmation *is*, and many of these are inaccurate and misleading. We use the word, as Humpty-Dumpty said to Alice, to mean what we choose it to mean. And, as Alice responded, "The question is, whether you can make words mean so many different things!"

Whether happily or unhappily, Kavanagh's book represents one more step in the erosion of our traditional views regarding confirmation.

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## **Meletius, sive De iis quae inter Christianos conveniunt Epistola**

Hugo Grotius

Critical edition with translation, commentary and introduction  
by Guillaume H.M. Posthumus Meyjes

Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1988

xx + 191 pp. U.S. \$42.50

It is hardly a common occurrence when a long-lost work by a famous author is recovered and presented to the scholarly world. The publication of the *Meletius* by Hugo Grotius is just such an event. The existence of the work had been known to modern scholarship since the publication in 1928 of the first volume of Grotius correspondence, but the *Meletius* had never been published and the manuscript was presumed lost. Posthumus Meyjes' introduction recounts not only the origin and purpose of the work but also intrigues the reader with the scholarly detective story of the recovery and identification of the work, which had been preserved under its original title, but without attribution to any author, in a set of Remonstrant documents deposited in the Amsterdam University Library toward the end of the nineteenth century.

The *Meletius*, written at the time of the Remonstrance and before the Synod of Dort, is an irenic document, named after the Greek patriarch, Meletius Pegas (1541-1601), himself an irenicist devoted to the reconciliation of Christians. The work stands as an important document in the life of Grotius and as a valuable introduction to the thought of this scholarly figure, respected by his century for his work on jurisprudence and for his learned annotations on the Greek New Testament, remembered still for his theory of the atonement and for his apologetic treatise *On the Truth of the Christian Religion*.

In many ways, the unpublished *Meletius* can be regarded as a prologue or preparation for the later apologetic. Posthumus Meyjes argues convincingly that Grotius assumed the capacity of human reason for divine truth and, therefore, the possibility of rational agreement concerning the content and substance of the Christian religion. In order to lead his readers toward this conclusion, Grotius discusses first the existence, character, and purpose