

BIBLICAL ROOTS OF CONFIRMATION

Paul Turner

Confirmation in the Catholic Church celebrates the gift of the Holy Spirit. Catholics believe that the faithful first receive the Holy Spirit in baptism, but the sacrament of confirmation offers the strength of the Spirit in a special gift, empowering Christians to bear witness to the faith. The primary biblical root of confirmation is the story of the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4).

According to Acts of the Apostles, the disciples gathered in an upper room after the ascension. The Holy Spirit came upon them with the sound of a mighty wind and under the form of tongues of fire. As a result of this event, the disciples were transformed from a fearsome, leaderless lot to a visionary, mission-centered, evangelical group. The gift of the Holy Spirit empowered them to bear witness to the risen Christ before the entire world.

When adults are baptized in a Roman Catholic parish, the priest who baptizes also confirms them in the same ceremony. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults says, "The conjunction of the two celebrations signifies the unity of the paschal mystery, the close link between the mission of the Son and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and the connection between the two sacraments through which the Son and the Holy Spirit come with the Father to those who are baptized" (215).

Thus, confirmation's meaning is linked to that of baptism. If baptism accomplishes the mission of the Son, confirmation celebrates the outpouring of the Spirit. But the two realities cannot be separated. The foundational meaning of confirmation is linked to baptism just as Pentecost is linked to Easter. Resurrection implies evangelization.

The Roman Catholic Church administers confirmation with the words, "Be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit." The one being confirmed receives the seal of the Holy Spirit as a gift, but with the expectation that the gift of the Spirit will impel the believer to bear witness for Christ.

Biblical roots

The coming of the Spirit was foretold in the Old Testament and in the life of Christ.

Jesus predicted the outpouring of the Holy Spirit throughout his ministry. Both Luke and John offer numerous examples.

Jesus comforted the apostles with the promise that in times of persecution the Holy Spirit would teach them what they should say (Luke 12:12). He advocated a second birth by the Spirit (John 3:5-8). He foresaw rivers of living water flowing from those who received the Spirit (John 7:37-39). At the Last Supper he promised to send the Paraclete (John 16:7-15). At the ascension he

said the disciples would receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them, and they would be witnesses to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

Two texts from the same evangelists especially feature the fulfillment of these promises. In John's gospel, on the night after the resurrection, Jesus breathed on the disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (20:22). In Luke's Acts of the Apostles, the Spirit came to the upper room fifty days later.

Both Easter and Pentecost realize the fulfillment of Jesus' promises. He sent the Holy Spirit to be with his followers on both occasions. On Pentecost Sunday, the Catholic lectionary includes both these passages about the giving of the Spirit.

Through the eyes of New Testament faith, the promise of the Spirit is seen embedded in Old Testament passages as well. God said through Joel, for example, "I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh" (3:1). Peter quotes this passage to interpret Pentecost right after the gift of the Spirit (Acts 2:17). The psalmist also seems to prophesy: "When you send forth your spirit, [creatures] are created, and you renew the face of the earth" (Psalm 104:30). God prophesied over the dry bones in Ezekiel's vision: "I will bring spirit into you, that you may come to life" (37:5, 14).

All these passages indicate that God had planned the gift of the Spirit from the beginning and revealed the plan in various ways. Its full manifestation would be clearer in the preaching of Jesus.

The sacrament of confirmation in the Catholic Church is most firmly rooted in texts like these from both the Old and the New Testaments. Throughout the Bible, God promised to send the Holy Spirit upon the people. This happened most dramatically in the experience of Pentecost. In the life of the Church, this same outpouring of the Spirit continues to be manifest under the sacramental form of confirmation.

Problematic texts

However, Catholic theology frequently explains the origins of confirmation with other biblical passages: Acts of the Apostles 8:14-17; 19:1-7; and Hebrews 6:1-2. Although the application of these passages largely goes unchallenged, they do not adequately lay the foundation for confirmation. All these texts describe handlaying by the apostolic Church, but they do not establish a consistent pattern of initiatory handlaying. Nor did the practice of confirmation develop directly from these stories.

In Acts 8, Philip the deacon baptized a group of men and women in Samaria, including Simon the magician. In this story (9-13), nothing indicates that these baptisms were insufficient.

In the next verses (14-17), though, the apostles at Jerusalem send Peter and John to Samaria because people there had accepted the word of God. The emissaries discover that the Samaritans were baptized only in the name of the

Lord Jesus, so Peter and John imposed hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

This passage raises questions. Are these two sections part of the same original story? Or might there be two independent traditions here that Luke joined? Verses 14-17 never mention Philip. They refer to baptisms in Samaria, but are these the very ones Philip performed? Because these verses follow 9-13, they seem to accuse Philip of improperly administering baptism. If the stories were separate, Philip may be innocent, and someone else may have provoked suspicion among the apostles in Jerusalem.

But why is baptism "in the name of the Lord Jesus" a problem? Peter urges baptism in the name of Jesus at Pentecost (2:38) and in the house of Cornelius (10:48). The inadequacy of this baptism in Acts 8 is hard to explain.

In any event, the story of handlaying in chapter 8 tells of an unusual incident correcting an insufficient baptism.

In Acts 19, Paul imposes hands on a group of twelve. They had received John's baptism for the forgiveness of sins, but not the Holy Spirit. So they were baptized "in the name of the Lord Jesus." The text does not say who baptized, but Paul imposed hands. Two different kinds of baptism are mentioned here: John's and "in the name of Jesus." In Acts 8, baptism in the name of Jesus appeared to be problematic and needed to be followed with handlaying. In Acts 19, the twelve were baptized in the name of Jesus because John's baptism was insufficient.

Once again, the story tells of an unusual circumstance. Handlaying by an apostle followed an insufficient baptism. The number of people involved was twelve.

Developments in the Early Church

Both stories in Acts 8 and 19 describe unusual baptismal circumstances. In the normal descriptions of baptism throughout the New Testament, there is no mention of handlaying: not in crowds like the three thousand (2:41), the five thousand (4:4) or the Corinthians (18:8); not in households like that of Cornelius (10:48), Lydia (16:15), the jailer (16:33), Crispus (18:8) or Stephanas (1 Cor 1:16); and not among individuals like the Ethiopian eunuch (8:38) or Paul (9:19). The evidence indicates that baptisms in the apostolic church did not include handlaying for the Holy Spirit, except in unusual circumstances. There is absolutely no evidence that any New Testament baptism included an anointing.

The Letter to the Hebrews lists among the foundations of faith repentance, instruction about baptisms, handlaying, resurrection and judgment. By mentioning baptisms and handlaying in the same sentence, this verse (6:2) fed the opinion in later Christianity that the two rituals belonged together in the apostolic church. But the sentence makes no assumption that handlaying was part of the baptismal ritual, nor that it had any initiatory function.

At first, these passages did not play a major role in the development of the rites of initiation. By the second century there is evidence of baptisms taking place within the context of eucharist, probably with the bishop presiding. Anointing and handlaying can be seen in the rites shortly thereafter. By the third and fourth centuries there were instances when baptisms were administered without the bishop, due to illness or distance from the cathedral. If possible, the baptized were brought to the bishop later for omitted rites, which may well have included handlaying, anointing or prayer for the Holy Spirit.

Baptizing and Confirming

By the fifth century, the church began to call this postbaptismal anointing and handlaying “confirming”. Originally a juridical term showing the bishop’s approval of someone else’s baptism, the word gained more prominence when compared to 1 Corinthians 1:21-22: “God confirms us with you in Christ and has anointed us, putting a seal on us and giving us the Spirit.”

Only in the fifth century did Acts 8 and 19 enter more strongly into the history of initiation. In practice, priests were baptizing and bishops were confirming on a later occasion. It looked like what happened in two instances of the apostolic church: deacons or other ministers baptized, but apostles, the predecessors of bishops, imposed hands. Thus began a custom of interpreting Acts 8 and 19 as the origins of confirmation.

For example, Pope Innocent I linked these passages to the practice of “consigning” or confirming neophytes: “About consigning neophytes, it is clear that it is not permitted to be done by anyone other than a bishop. . . . Not only does ecclesiastical custom show that this is reserved to bishops alone—that they consign or bestow the Spirit paraclete—but also that passage from the Acts of the Apostles which asserts that Peter and John had been directed to bestow the Holy Spirit to those already baptized” (Letter to Decentius of Gubbio).

Nonetheless, the Catholic Rite of Confirmation still relies on Acts 8 and 19. Paul VI’s Apostolic Constitution on the Sacrament of Confirmation says, “From that time on the apostles, in fulfillment of Christ’s wish, imparted the gift of the Spirit to the newly baptized by the laying on of hands to complete the grace of baptism. Hence it is that the Letter to the Hebrews lists among the first elements of Christian instruction the teaching about baptisms and the laying on of hands. This laying on of hands is rightly recognized by Catholic tradition as the beginning of the sacrament of confirmation, which in a certain way perpetuates the grace of Pentecost in the Church.”

But it probably didn’t happen that way. There is credible evidence that the Holy Spirit dwelled with the baptized throughout history. But there is no credible evidence that the apostles imposed hands with every baptism. They probably assumed that the Holy Spirit came with baptism. The practice of confirmation developed later, albeit as a natural, faithful outgrowth of apostolic custom.

Conclusion

The biblical passages that best root the sacrament of confirmation are those that speak of the coming of the Holy Spirit on Easter and Pentecost. They demonstrate the clear intent of Christ that his Spirit remain with the Church after the resurrection. That Spirit, prophesied in the Old Testament, promised by Jesus, and evidenced in Acts, still comes as a gift to those who are anointed and strengthened by the prayer for the Holy Spirit and the imposition of hands in the sacrament of confirmation.

Paul Turner is pastor of St. Munchin Catholic Church in Cameron, Missouri, and of St. Aloysius Church in Maysville. He holds a doctorate in sacred theology from Sant' Anselmo in Rome and is the author of Ages of Initiation: The First Two Christian Millennia (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2000).