Theology of Confirmation

“Theology must be the presupposition to any curriculum.” —Randolph Crump Miller

One of the things that I enjoy most about the very first confirmation class every year is the encounter with the young person who clearly does not want to be there. He or she normally sits in the back of the room with eyes fixed upon whatever is going on outside the nearest door or window and reluctantly provides answers that are generally short, and perhaps even inaudible.

As off-putting as this student’s actions can be, he or she is one of my favorite “types” of student to encounter. I know that the initial resistance, while hard fought, will wane as he or she begins to open up over the course of the confirmation experience. Perhaps you have encountered this type of student also. An experience with a reluctant student reminds us of the limitations of our role as teachers in relationship to the limitless ability of God’s mysterious work through the Holy Spirit. This type of experience should also underscore the importance of creating a confirmation experience in which God can work.

The Great Commission is foundational to the understanding of confirmation and should be infused in how the experience is structured. Our mission is to baptize and then teach for transformation. Although baptism is an event that happens only once and should be remembered, teaching is ongoing. As confirmation leaders, our role is to offer young people the opportunity to affirm for themselves the desire to live in Christian community, help them to understand and embrace our rich Methodist traditions and beliefs, and encourage
them to be open to the Holy Spirit. Confirmation is an important part of a person’s spiritual journey and to building vital congregations. Our task is to help others—students, parents, and the whole of the congregation—to understand that confirmation truly is sacred.

As we turn our attention to the theology of confirmation, I would like to invite you to reflect upon the following questions:

- First, what Scripture verse undergirds your beliefs about confirmation?

- Secondly, how do you understand God to be involved in the confirmation experience?

- Finally, why have you chosen to teach/lead the confirmation experience?

As much as individuals question the meaning and importance of confirmation today, we must help them to understand that it is an opportunity to encounter God. According to The Book of Discipline, “[t]heology is our effort to reflect upon God’s gracious action in our lives,” the church, and the world. These theological reflections should give “expression to the mysterious reality of God’s presence, peace, and power” so that we may “articulate more clearly our understanding of the divine-human encounter” and be prepared more fully “to participate in God’s work in the world.”

As United Methodists, we are called to identify the needs both of individuals and of society and to address those needs out of the resources of our Christian faith in a way that is clear, convincing, and effective. In order to do so we, as United Methodists of every age and stage, should have a personal understanding of God. Thus, our theological task as believers should be both critical and constructive, individual and communal, contextual and incarnational, and essentially practical. Let’s explore these aspects of coming to know God.
Critical and Constructive

First, our task is critical in that we test various expressions of faith by asking: Are they true? appropriate? clear? cogent? credible? Are they based on love? Do they provide the church and its members with a witness that is faithful to the gospel as reflected in our living heritage and that is authentic and convincing in the light of human experience and the present state of human knowledge? Our theological task is also constructive in that every generation must appropriate creatively the wisdom of the past and seek God in their midst in order to think afresh about God, revelation, sin, redemption, worship, the church, freedom, justice, moral responsibility, and other significant theological concerns. Our summons is to understand and receive the gospel promises in our troubled and uncertain times.

Individual and Communal

Our theological task is also both individual and communal. It is a feature in the ministry of individual Christians and requires the participation of all who are in our church. Because the mission of the church is to be carried out by everyone who is called to discipleship, our theological task is also communal. It unfolds in conversations open to the experiences, insights, and traditions of all constituencies that make up United Methodism.

Contextual and Incarnational

Next, our theological task is contextual and incarnational. It is grounded upon God’s supreme mode of self-revelation. We understand this as the Incarnation in Jesus Christ that is energized by our involvement in the daily life of the church and the world, as we participate in God’s liberating and saving action.
Finaly, our theological task is essentially practical. Our understanding of God should inform the individual’s daily decisions and serve the life and work of the church. We should be able to “walk our talk.” Therefore, as confirmation leaders, we should create an experience that offers individuals the opportunity to reflect upon God in ways that are critical and constructive, focused not only on themselves but also others, and practical so that they may feel empowered to exercise their understanding of God as they engage the church and the world.

Confirmation is an extension of the relationship that God initiates in baptism (see “What Is Confirmation?”). So it follows that God continues to act in a self-giving way through the confirmation community because of the relationship previously established. That relationship—binding and inescapable—is also known as a covenant. Covenant and community are foundational to our understanding of and participation in God’s work. Let’s explore each of these.

Covenant, the relationship between God and humanity, is mentioned in both the Old and New Testaments. Thanks to Jesus work on the cross, throughout biblical history, and ultimately to all of humanity, God established a new covenantal relationship that promises eternal life, grace, divine provision, and protection. This convenant shall never be broken by God because it is permanent. Unfortunately, however, the covenant has been mishandled by us throughout history. Our humanness can cause us to think more highly of ourselves than of God. Even though God intends the covenant for our good, we often reject God’s faithfulness for our short-sighted thinking. As a result, such actions lead to situations that do not glorify God and lead to accountability and consequences. Instead our responsibility is to respond in obedience and to praise God for such mighty acts. Also, our responsibility is to honor the covenant so that the witness in Christ will encourage others to do the same.
Confirmation, then, is an opportunity for us to live into the covenant which God has made in such a way that each student, through the work of the Holy Spirit, will willingly embrace the covenant with a complete understanding of the commitment and responsibility required. In order for the individual to faithfully live into this covenant, we must teach in such a way that her or his heart will be led to say “yes” to Christ. Now that we have covered the meaning and importance of covenant, let us turn our attention to the importance of community.

Confirmation offers a special community where intentional nurturing and faith formation can occur. As previously stated, God who is self-giving in baptism is present and extended in confirmation through the various types of community that are formed during this experience. Therefore, community is an important part of confirmation. As Jesus is teaching about how we should welcome, value, and relate to one another, he offers these words:

“For where two or three are gathered in my name, I’m there with them” (Matthew 18:20).

Community matters and the community formed through each confirmation experience is precious because Jesus is in the midst—available to each person involved. We must not only remember this but also create a space that honors Jesus’ presence and the possibilities that entails.

As Jesus stated, the environment should be welcoming, nonjudgmental, and encouraging so that each person feels free. It should be a safe space where the individual dares to encounter God in a new way. It should be a nurturing space where questions about that encounter are freely expressed by all. While there is a larger community formed by all who are involved, it is also important to remember that there are communities within the whole that should offer the same sense of being.
Each of the iterations of community that are possible during confirmation should be encouraged and supported. These communities are family, peer to peer, mentor/mentee, youth group, and the broader church. Each community is important because each of us encounters God in different ways, and each type provides unique opportunities through which young people encounter the self-giving of God. Therefore, even though it is not a sacrament, our view of this experience and the potential for a young person to encounter God should yield a sacramental view of confirmation.

Methodist’s Theological Perspective on Confirmation

Indeed, confirmation offers young people an intentional time to explore God, but there were many who did not believe that confirmation was necessary, including John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement. Wesley intentionally stressed that there were only two sacraments: baptism and Communion. He questioned the need for confirmation. Because baptism serves as the entry point for Christian community and offers regeneration to all, Wesley wondered why one would “bother with confirmation” when baptism was all-encompassing. In fact, he was so against confirmation that he did not include it in the Book of Worship for American Methodists.

However, Wesley did affirm the importance of the personal appropriation of that which was communicated in baptism. “He constantly reminded parents and pastors of the importance of their teaching and discipline as part of the church’s role in helping its baptized members fulfill the promise in Baptism.” ³ As such, there was a constant tension for him between the prevenient grace and regenerating spirit that incorporates children into the church and the need for a subsequent profession of faith which Wesley had to acknowledge. ⁴ Even with his beliefs regarding baptism, Wesley had to acknowledge this need for the individual to process his or her faith for salvation.
As a result of this tension, we as United Methodists have the shortest history with regard to confirmation among our brothers and sisters in other denominations. In our Methodist history, confirmation language began to appear in the early 1900s in services although not officially in our worship publications. At one time, baptized children of the church were presented as those who desired to confirm the vows of their baptism and to enter into the active duties and the full privileges of membership in Christ’s church. Those who were baptized as infants/children were classified as “preparatory members” and a special service was held at the appropriate time for them. While this service was not called confirmation, the language of the Spirit’s action in strengthening members was incorporated. 5

As the Methodist Church continued to explore its identity, its way of doing confirmation varied as well. By the 1950s, the term confirmation was more widely used. In the 1964 Book of Worship, the term confirmation was adopted at General Conference. 6 While this was done “officially” by the church to clarify the importance of baptism in the 1960s, the Methodist Church continued to further define it. Changes to the confirmation service continued throughout the 1980s and 1990s, making it clear that confirmation pointed back to baptism. 7

According to Richard Osmer, the new baptismal and confirmation services added a strong covenantal framework to the earlier understanding. 8 Today, in the section “Concerning The Services of the Baptismal Covenant,” the words “those baptized before they are old enough to take the vows for themselves make their personal profession of faith in the service called confirmation” and distinguishes this group from “those who are able to take the vows for themselves at their baptism” who are not confirmed. 9 “No separate ritual of confirmation is needed for the believing person.” 10 To be clear, confirmation is not a process offered for one to “join the church,” because that actually happens during baptism. Confirmation enables individuals to
respond in faith for themselves to the United Methodist tradition and commit to give their prayers, presence, gifts, witness, and service to the church. But there is more to the experience than that of the individual. In addition to the individual’s personal commitment to the baptismal covenant, confirmation confirms God’s promise made in baptism and the congregation’s commitment made in baptism.

The individual confirms the grace of God received during baptism and the covenant community confirms its joining in the growth in grace but, ultimately, confirmation is the work of the Holy Spirit. Because confirmation is understood as the strengthening of and making firm of one in Christian faith and life, it is the Holy Spirit that does the confirming.

Further, because confirmation seals in covenant the personal commitment of one who was baptized into Christian community under the commitment of a parent, guardian, or sponsor; it eliminates the need to be confirmed for adults who responded in baptism for themselves. Confirmation does not bestow the Holy Spirit because that has already occurred in baptism. Thus, the Holy Spirit is already present.

Confirmation also rules out the misnomer that reaffirming baptism occurs only once. Because salvation is an ongoing process towards “Christian perfection,” then the reaffirming of the baptismal covenant should be a continuous process. The United Methodist Hymnal states that after confirmation or baptism, when candidates take vows for themselves, Christians are encouraged to reaffirm the Baptismal Covenant from time to time. This, of course, is not to be misunderstood as a re-baptism. As United Methodists we believe that “God’s promise to us in the sacrament is steadfast.”

Given all of the changes that have occurred in the history of Christian initiation, and confirmation specifically for our purposes, it is understandable why there is often confusion about what each means and how each connect. So, let us consider the following frequently asked questions as you convey the importance of confirmation.
Practical Questions With Theological Underpinnings

As you may or may not be aware, you as the teacher/leader will be viewed as the resident expert on “all things confirmation.” However, being bestowed with such a responsibility should not cause alarm. Please know that because God’s ways are mysterious, and God has not fully revealed God’s self to any of us, it is not humanly possible to know all of the answers. Hebrews 11:1 reminds us:

“Faith is the reality of what we hope for, the proof of what we don’t see.”

In fact, there will be who, what, when, where, how, and why questions to which only God knows the answers. This should be both freeing for you and for students who believe they need complete understanding.

My child is not excited about being a part of confirmation. Does he/she have to participate?

While we cannot force faith upon others, it is important for parents to understand that the commitment they made when their child was baptized is not enough for the child’s salvation. When their son or daughter was baptized, the parents reaffirmed their faith and agreed to “nurture your child in Christ’s holy church, that by your teaching and example they may be guided to accept God’s grace for themselves, to profess their faith openly, and to lead a Christian life.” 15 But each person must accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior personally in order for his or her faith to be understood as his or her own and truly “walk in the way that leads to life.” 16
**Are adults confirmed?**

Adults who are presented for baptism and respond individually do not need to be confirmed for “they have made their public profession of faith at the font” and taken their vows for him or herself. 17

**What is the purpose of adult confirmation class?**

There are several scenarios where this could be an option. The first is for the parents of confirmands. In my experience of teaching confirmation, parents often realize that their child going through confirmation knows more about the United Methodist way than they do. As a result, these parents have asked for a similar class so they can learn as well. I have also had parents ask to sit in on the student classes in order to learn along with their teens – and both were welcomed enthusiastically.

Another possible scenario is for those coming from another faith tradition to join the church. While a new-member class is one option, some individuals may be seeking a more extensive learning opportunity. These individuals could join with the parents of confirmands for a potentially rewarding experience.

**How long should a confirmation experience last? How long does it take for the Holy Spirit to work?**

Confirmation is not an event unto itself. The work of the Holy Spirit begins before that moment, continues in that moment, and extends beyond that moment because we are constantly growing and moving towards perfection. As a result, there is no way of attaching a timetable to the work of the Holy Spirit.

Context should be your best guide for the most appropriate length of time for a confirmation experience. You may have
one student who receives one-on-one attention for three months, during which you cover all of the necessary topics (how to do confirmation will be discussed in the next section); you may have a group of ten students receiving extensive instruction during Sunday school or during children’s ministry activities who already know the material you will cover; or, you might have a group of two hundred children who have no interest in anything related to confirmation. Each of these scenarios require a different amount of time. However, regardless of the situation, it is important to remember that not all can be covered in such an experience that one’s faith will be complete. It is necessary that individuals continue to learn even after they are confirmed.

The Church’s Role in Confirmation and the Continuum of Faith Formation

In *A Hidden Wholeness*, Parker Palmer states that there is no other group or agency that can do what the church does: make it “safe for the soul to show up and offer us its guidance.” 18 As baptized children grow, they need constant and intentional nurture. If a person is to be empowered to live out faithfully the human side of the baptismal covenant, Christian nurture is essential and the responsibility belongs not only to parents but also to the entire faith community.

The church itself is a means of grace in the lives of children who are growing up within it; the church is an instrument needed for the shaping of Christians. Christian nurture should include both the cognitive process of learning and the spiritual process of formation. Nurture should begin before the confirmand professes his or her faith and it should be ongoing. 19
What happens during the confirmation experience?

In these weekly classes, your son or daughter will be exposed to the United Methodist way of faith. While openly discussing history, theological concepts, and membership in the church, we trust the Holy Spirit will be inwardly at work. In order for the confirmand to understand what it means to personally respond to Christ and then do so, each student will develop a deeper relationship with God and his or her peers, while learning about himself or herself during the confirmation experience. The teenager will learn about how important it is to be involved in the life of the church and what that involvement requires of him or her. He or she will begin to put this understanding into practice while engaging with leaders of the church, learning their gifts and graces, and finding opportunities to be engaged well after the confirmation experience concludes.

What happens after my child is confirmed?

As United Methodists we believe the ministry of all Christians in Christ’s name and spirit is both a gift and a task (see ¶129 in *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*). The gift is God’s unmerited grace; the task is unstinting service. Entrance into and acceptance of ministry begin in a local church, but the impulse to minister always moves one beyond the congregation toward the whole human community. God’s gifts are richly diverse for a variety of services; yet all have dignity and worth. Each member commits to give their prayers, presence, gifts, witness, and service in all aspects of life as Christians (see ¶217.6 in *The Book of Discipline*).

When the confirmation experience is done well, everyone involved is transformed, including the leader, because of the encounter with God through this special community. Not only does the student cultivate a deeper level of faith to live out in The United Methodist Church and the world, but also
the volunteers, mentors, parents, and the congregation are reminded of their personal faith journey. Ultimately, everyone is strengthened and the congregation is more “alive” and better able to witness to God’s faithfulness as it continues to baptize and teach toward the transformation of the world.