

The Message of Confirmation

by Rev. Tim Pauls

Ah, confirmation—a defining mark of Lutheran congregations. It’s supposed to be a good thing, the pastor preparing youth for communicant membership. Too often, though, it’s seen only as a necessary rite of passage to endure rather than a blessing to enjoy.

For some reason, teenagers just don’t seem to enjoy memorizing the Catechism or giving up their Wednesday nights to attend class. They often arrive as unwilling participants. And frankly, when that’s the atmosphere, we pastors aren’t all that excited, either.

So, what to do? I’ve contemplated other options, like a reality-show format where we vote one student out of the class each week. But I believe there’s a better way. Here are a few suggestions that pastors and parents might find helpful.

1. Start at Home

Each chief part of the Small Catechism begins with the subtitle, “As the head of the family should teach it in a simple way to his household.” The Small Catechism isn’t supposed to be the mystery book that your child suddenly discovers in confirmation class. It’s designed to be used in the home by the family. When it gets used at home, it communicates to your child that it’s a book for use in life, not just at church.

2. Start Early

God created toddlers with the astonishing ability to memorize. They can hear a jingle on the radio one time and sing it back to you for the next eight hours in the car. (What a fun trip that is!)

Young kids are very good at learning words by heart, even if they don’t understand what the words mean; so help children memorize the Catechism while they’re still very young. They won’t understand all the words; that will come later. For now, teach the text.

One of the great errors of education today is to think that kids need to understand the words before they learn them. So parents tend to leave the Catechism on the shelf. Meanwhile, kids are growing up listening to ads and music, often loaded with sexual innuendo. They’re memorizing this stuff even though they don’t understand the meanings. But they will.

Later, when they become puberty-stricken teenagers, their parents expect them to do memory work. That’s the last thing they want to do. Eighth-graders don’t want to memorize—they want to argue, which actually is a necessary and helpful skill in education when properly directed. That’s why you give them the data at an earlier age, so they can defend it and debate it later on. Confirmation-class time is much better spent discussing doctrine than reviewing memory work.

Young children want to be grown up. That's why they follow you around the house, put on your shoes, and try everything that you're trying. They want to use grownup words and sing grownup songs. If you work with them at memorizing, they'll want to do it, too. And if you tell them that this is what eighth-graders do, they'll work hard to be like "the big kids."

Don't be afraid of big church-words. Kids love them. Recently, I was talking to two 6-year-old students from our school in front of a bunch of adults. When I mentioned that we all were sinful, one of them said, "But God justifies us!"

The second one soberly added, "This is good, because we are concupiscent."

I imagine that the adults scurried for dictionaries when they got home. But the point is, when children hear new words, they want to use them.

Another big mistake is to believe that kids want to be young and cute. They don't. Sure, they'll learn little children's songs, but they're also capable of learning serious hymns. They love to sing them by memory in worship with the "big people."

It's disturbing that so many parents approve of makeup for very young girls, but then want to limit their vocabulary to childish words. Meanwhile, the world isn't waiting—it's indoctrinating your kids about grownup issues at early ages.

Dinosaur books (practically every boy's favorite) preach evolution, and after-school TV shows for kids imply that all religions are the same. It's a bad idea to give the world a decade's head start on these matters.

3. Take Little Steps

You may feel ill-equipped and unprepared to teach the faith at home. However, you have the tools you need and more opportunities than you realize. You probably already read stories to your children; so read them Bible stories and talk about what God does for people in each one.

If you have a toddler in a stroller or a bike seat, recite the Apostles' Creed during the ride. Call your child over from the swing set and whisper, "Hey, do you know what? 'We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.'" Kids love it when adults take time to impart information, because it makes them feel more grown-up.

Celebrate their baptismal birthdays every year, so that they understand that it is important to you. Get a copy of the Catechism on CD and play it in the car. Better yet, print off a portion of the Small Catechism on a piece of paper and hang it in the kitchen. Each day, memorize three or four more words as a family. Don't force it. Make it a simple, important family ritual over the years.

4. Review Frequently

As the old saying goes, "Repetition is the mother of all learning." Challenge your children to repeat the memory work you've learned as a family or to tell you their favorite Bible stories. Praise them lavishly when they do.

5. Model Church Attendance

Your kids are watching you; your actions teach them what is important to you. When parents drop off their kids for Sunday School on their way to breakfast, it sends the message that they skip Bible class because they believe that there's a time when we can stop learning about the Lord and His grace.

When parents attend worship only sporadically, it teaches their children that church is something to be done occasionally—that Jesus' presence and forgiveness are no more important than sports or reading the paper in bed.

6. Model Study at Home

Set aside some time for your own prayer and Bible reading. Your kids need the example. You need the Word.

7. Model Repentance

It's hypocritical to teach your kids about confession and then never apologize to them for your mistakes. And your kids know it. So confess your sins when you mess up, and ask for their forgiveness. Furthermore, voice your thankfulness that Jesus forgives you, too.

One of the failures that you may need to confess is that you haven't taught the faith at home through the years, and now you're facing a rebellious confirmand. Don't bluster and threaten. Confess. And then rejoice that the Lord forgives you for all of your sins. When all is said and done, that is the message of confirmation.

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About the Author: [Rev. Tim Pauls](#) is associate pastor of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Boise, Idaho. This story appeared originally in the July/August 2006 Lutheran Witness. LCMS congregations may reprint for parish use. All other rights reserved. Text copyright © 2006 by Tim Pauls. Used by permission.

For a commentary on the state of confirmation in the LCMS, see Dr. Marvin Bergman's essay, "Confirmation—More than a Graduation," in the September 2010 Reporter. Dr. Bergman's observations also are available in *Reporter Online* [here](#).

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