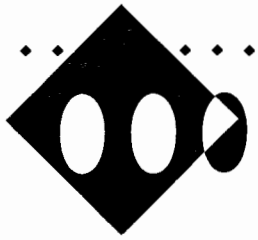

SOME WORDS ABOUT . . .

CONFIRMED *(bebaios)*

Terence Y. Mullins

The *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV) is fairly consistent in translating *bebaioo* as either confirm or strengthen. (The former is not a bad translation but the latter misses the mark a bit.) It uses confirmation for *bebaiosis* (Philippians 1:7 and Hebrews 6:16). But it varies wildly in translating *bebaios*, using confirm only at 2 Peter 1:10,19.

The best translation occurs at Hebrews 2:2: "For if the message delivered through angels was valid . . ." That catches the real meaning of *bebaios*.

Before the New Testament

In the Septuagint there is a passage which says that if a dwelling house in a walled city is sold, the seller may redeem it within a year, but when a year passed, the ownership of the house shall be valid *(bebaios)* for the purchaser and his descendants (Leviticus 25:30).

Epictetus says that people who put off changing their lives validate *(bebaioseis)* Hesiod's line that one who loiters will run into misfortune.

The basic idea here involves a change in the accepted status of something rather than a change in the thing itself.

In the New Testament

In dealing with confirmation or validation in the New Testament, we must preserve the idea that one does not change a thing by confirming or validating it. Things are what they are. Validation assures people that things are what they seem. When Paul says that Christ became a servant of the circumcised "in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs" (Romans 15:8), he is not saying that Christ in any way changed those promises but that he changed human perception of them.

But to say that "the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you" (1 Corinthians 1:6) is to suggest in some way to make it stronger. And "he will strengthen you to the end" (1:8) conveys a very different message than "he will validate you until the end."

The difference is perhaps less in 2 Corinthians 1:7 between "Our hope for you is unshaken" and "Our hope for you is validated" or in Romans 4:16 between "guaranteed" and "validated." But the difference is important in 2 Corinthians 1:21 between saying that "God establishes us with you in Christ" and "God validates us with you in Christ." A similar difference exists between saying that the Colossians are "established in the faith" and that they are "validated in the faith." The issue is whether God has placed his seal of approval upon an existing relationship or has change one.

In 2 Peter 1:10, the *NRSV* translates "Therefore, brothers and sisters, be all the more eager to confirm your call and election, for if you do this, you will never stumble." The hint is there that confirmation can keep one from stumbling. But that is not what the text says. It says "if you do these things" (*tauta*) and refers—as the same word in 1:8 and 1:9 did—to the list of good actions given in 1:5-6. Neither in 1:10 nor in 1:19 is confirmation said to change the nature of anything, just the perception of the nature of something.

Hebrews makes the most extensive use of the idea of validation. From 2:2 to 13:19, it deals with the idea seven times. It is 9:17, however, which shows us what the writer means by the term. There he says that a will is valid at death (*diatheke gar epi nebrosis*) since it is not in effect while the testator lives. The will is the same will, but its status changes when the testator dies.

In 2:3 either "attested" or "validated" conveys the meaning of the writer, but in 3:6 and 3:14 there is a difference between speaking of our holding fast and of our validating the confidence and pride that belong to hope. The difference is between appropriating (holding vast) and exhibiting (validating) the confidence of our hope. In 6:19 the matter again is whether our hope is valid or steadfast, though the difference is not as great as in 3:6.

Finally, in 13:9, to say that the heart is strengthened by grace is somewhat different from saying that the heart is validated by grace. Since the point made is that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever, the suggestion that a relationship is changed does not fit here as well as the suggestion that a relationship is validated.

It should be noted that the long ending of Mark, written in the same general linguistic atmosphere as the gospel, states that the Lord worked with his apostles and validated their message by signs (16:20).

Today

Despite differences of approach to the rite of confirmation, most Protestant groups are fairly close to the New Testament understanding of the word. Confirmation does not add anything to the relationship which God establishes at baptism. What it does is given a public exhibition of an existing relationship. The change is not in the thing itself but in the social perception of the thing. Confirmation does not relate to salvation. It does relate to the effectiveness of one's witness.

Terence Y. Mullins is an author, pastor, and editor of adult Bible curriculum.