

CHILDREN AND THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY COMMUNION (1975)

The 1973 Conference resolved that the Report 'Children and the Sacrament of Holy Communion' be printed in the *Minutes of Conference* (see pp. 50-51 of the Minutes of that year) and directed the Faith and Order Committee to bring a report on this matter to the Conference of 1974. The 1974 Conference gave leave to the Committee to present its report to the Conference of 1975. Having considered the Report, the Faith and Order Committee believes that its most helpful action would be to advise the Conference on some of the implications, theological and practical, of adopting the policy suggested in the Report. In so far as the policy suggested in the Report would in some respect mark a departure from current general practice, the Committee thinks it right to set out the arguments which may be advanced in favour of keeping to our existing position. Support for our present position and for a greater flexibility were found both in the working party appointed by the Faith and Order Committee and in the Committee itself.

1. Constitution and Usage:

The historic tradition of Methodism about the admission to communion of children and others who are not full members is somewhat ambiguous. Wesley sometimes gave communion to children, though only after the most careful enquiry. The accounts of such events are very few and the circumstances plainly exceptional – 'an uncommon awe resting upon them' (Journal VII 23). Admission to communion at the services of the Methodist societies was rigidly controlled, and restricted to members, save in exceptional circumstances. This may be reflected in the statement in the Deed of Union: 'The Methodist Church recognises two sacraments namely Baptism and the Lord's Supper as of Divine Appointment and of perpetual obligation of which it is the privilege and duty of Members of the Methodist Church to avail themselves' (Clause 30). Statements by the Conference (e.g. On Holy Baptism, 1936 and 1952, and Church Membership, 1961) have been concerned with the relation of Baptism to membership in the Church and do not comment upon the relationship of children to Holy Communion. However, the dominant tradition has been that communicant status is related to acceptance into full membership and some have thought that this norm has been re-inforced by the tendency to assimilate reception into full membership to Anglican confirmation. On the other hand there has been widespread usage throughout Methodism in this country by which non-members are not only permitted but welcomed to receive communion. The phrase 'All who love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity and truth' is so common that it is often taken to be an official formula, though this is not the case. But those who make this invitation, it may be assumed, are thinking of people who, though not members, have the same level of commitment to Christ that is expected of members. If they are not communicant members of other churches and come to communion with any frequency they are usually invited to consider taking up the responsibilities and privileges of membership of Society. It may, however, be fairly said that there is nothing in the constitution of Methodism which decisively restricts communion to full members or denies it to children.

2. In favour of the Current General Practice:

In liturgical matters the Conference tends to act in an advisory rather than a legislative manner. It has set out norms of practice that the Methodist people are encouraged to follow. As far as the matter under consideration is concerned the pattern suggested is: infant baptism followed by nurturing within the life of the Church and, after profession of faith, public reception into full membership (or confirmation) which carries 'the privilege and duty' of Holy Communion and the responsibilities of being a member of a Society.

The advantages of this policy can be stated as follows:

- (a) Initiation into the Christian community has rarely been on the basis of baptism alone. Communicant status has been granted by baptism *plus* either chrismation or episcopal imposition of hands or evangelical faith. Our British Methodist tradition has emphasised the third of these. The present Methodist policy keeps the order of baptism, confirmation and first communion that has been characteristic of Christian initiation for many centuries.
- (b) The public nature of reception into full membership has emphasised the need for decisiveness in faith. This service allows an appropriate expression of conversion or evangelical faith that may come at an important stage in adolescence. To grant communicant status before confirmation would shift the emphasis away from evangelical experience.
- (c) Full membership (or confirmation) leads not only to communicant life in the Church but to responsibility in the total life of the Methodist Church. If communicant status were granted before full membership (or confirmation) it might lead to a loosening of the commitment to the institutional life of the Church: 'membership' being then considered as an optional extra.
- (d) It is believed that a relatively mature understanding of the implications of sharing in the eucharist is required before participation in it, and that we create problems of a pastoral nature if we encourage people to enter into something for which they are not ready. Though John Wesley did admit children to Holy Communion he first talked with them to assure himself that they possessed what he called 'a degree of faith' (cf. Journal VII 23; Letters III 138). Those who support this policy would not desire to lay down any firm rule as to what age is appropriate for confirmation and entry into the eucharistic life of the Church. If the considerations above were taken into account, the age of admission would be related to profession of faith and readiness to accept responsibility in the life of the Church.
- (e) Those who wish to retain our present practice do not believe that adequate biblical, theological, historical and pastoral evidence has been advanced to support a policy which, while described as 'flexibility and experiment', would disturb our traditional balance between infant baptism and the individual response of faith.
- (f) It is felt that unless the Connexion as a whole adopts the policy of admitting children to communion there will be a number of difficult consequences. When families move they will run the risk that children received at communion in one place will not be so received at another. Moreover, churches will be put under undue pressure to change their position because

of the arrival of such a child. It could also produce a further complication in the stationing of ministers.

- (g) Differences between churches exist with regard to many things, but it could be considered that in initiation policy the Church should act uniformly.
- (h) Those who advocate a retention of the present norm would draw attention to the great difficulty in establishing adequate criteria on which to base a judgment as to whether a child should be admitted to Holy Communion before confirmation. If the criteria are not clearly laid down then the tendency will be either towards indiscriminate admission or admission only when accompanied by parents.

3. In Favour of Greater Flexibility:

The Report did not advocate a total abandonment of the position described above. It recommended 'flexibility and experiment' in encouraging 'baptized children who sincerely desire it to receive Holy Communion after brief instruction at an earlier age than has been customary, whether or not this involves full membership or confirmation'. The implication is that in some cases children could be confirmed younger than is customary and in others admission to communion could precede reception into full membership. Some would welcome the former course: they hold *both* that it is right for many children to receive communion at an earlier age than is customary *and* that public reception into full membership or confirmation should precede this. They thus wish to abandon the idea that public reception or confirmation is concerned with entry into adult status or the assumption of full responsibility for the institutional life of the Church. This course which they advocate would not involve any departure from current practice as regards the order of events: baptism; then public reception into full membership or confirmation, leading at once to first communion; but drastically to reduce the customary age, though fully permissible under our constitution, would constitute such a departure from our usage that ministers and Church Councils might not feel able to do so without encouragement from the Conference. The latter course, communion before confirmation, is an even greater departure from our practice. The Report indicates some of the reasons for the departure and some of the safeguards that would have to be introduced if this course were to be followed responsibly. In this section we shall look at the reasons afresh and in the following section set out and extend the pastoral requirements of such a policy.

In Methodism we use the word membership in a variety of ways, but it is predominantly used to speak of the link people have with the institutional life of the Church. Members are members of a Society that has its place within the Methodist Church as a whole (cf. *Ministry, Baptism and Membership in the Methodist Church*, 1962, p. 20). But few would dispute that the baptized are also, in some sense, members of the Holy Catholic Church in which 'the Methodist Church claims and cherishes its place' (*C.P.D.* Clause 30, p. 61). Those who receive the sacrament of Holy Communion can also be properly called communicant members for in it, receiving the body of Christ, they are incorporated in the Body of Christ, the Church. The existing norm brings membership of Society and communicant membership together. But it is possible to regard these forms of membership as being appropriate expressions of commitment to Christ at different stages in human development. Willingness to become a member of Society implies a commitment to share in the missionary obligation of the Church and the institutional life that goes with it. This is a form of commitment that is suitable at the time when a person is accepting civic and other responsibilities and entering upon a vocation in the life of the world. It is an

inappropriate form of commitment for a young child. A different, but no less genuine, form of commitment may be expressed by a young child in receiving communion. Holy Communion has been experienced as a means of grace in a wide range of human situations. Similarly many responses to it have been possible, touching at different times and different levels the intellectual and emotional elements in the person who receives it. A young child, or even an adult, may not bring to it a great deal of the intellectual understanding that may be possible at a further stage in his development, yet he can make an appropriate response according to his capacity at that particular point in his development. The child may thus be admitted to communicant membership on the basis of his baptism *plus* the faith of which he is capable. John Wesley himself went further than this in seeing baptism giving 'union with the Church, a share in all its privileges' (Works X 191) and consistently ignored confirmation. A child thus introduced into the sacramental life of the Church can grow through it to that form of commitment we associate with 'conversion' and take on the responsibilities of membership of Society.

It can be asked: If we had no historical tradition in this matter would we believe it to be in harmony with what we find in the New Testament to admit children to Holy Communion? This question could be approached by asking: Do children have a place in the Kingdom of God? The actions and words of Jesus are taken by some to imply that they have. In this case it would be natural to admit to the Lord's Supper where this sacrament is viewed in the light of 'the Messianic banquet of the Kingdom'. If the eucharistic allusions in the accounts of the feeding of the multitudes are given weight then children would be involved in the eucharist as the boy is in the feeding story (John 6v. 9f.). So it could be argued that, if baptism introduces a person to the life of the Kingdom, baptized children are eligible to come to the Table of the Kingdom.

Nevertheless, we cannot cut ourselves off from historical traditions. It is generally accepted that initiation into the Church was from early centuries through a three-part rite – baptism, confirmation and first communion. In the West, however, confirmation and communion both became at different times separated by some years from a baptism that was still given to infants. It could be argued that if the Church allowed a change of such dimensions it should also be free now to change current practice and bring baptism and communion closer together.

The importance of 'conversion' in the spiritual development of the Christian is not in doubt. But Methodism has never stated that people must be converted before becoming members of the Church or communicants. Conversion is a free work of the Holy Spirit and is not essentially tied to any sacrament. It is difficult to state a compelling theological reason why baptized children should not be sharers in the sacrament of Holy Communion. Since this is a means of grace it should be available to all who can profit from it. The proposal to admit children to Holy Communion before reception into membership takes seriously the role of the sacrament in forming faith and shaping convictions.

Some believe that the policy now proposed in the Report would be in harmony with modern understanding of the processes by which a child learns and grows into maturity. Above all some see it affirming baptism as initiation into the Body of Christ.

4. Implications of a Change of Usage:

If a policy on these lines were adopted, there would be need for sensitive pastoral care at two points.

1. A child could be admitted to communion if (i) he is baptized, (ii) he wants it, (iii) those who have 'oversight' of the nurturing of the child in the Christian faith, *i.e.* the parents and those who represent the Church (the minister in association with the Pastoral Sub-committee), believe that receiving communion will be an appropriate response of faith on the part of the child in terms of his stage of development. We recognise that applying these conditions in some cases would not be easy and care would be required. It would be a serious mistake to give the impression that the Church was mounting a campaign to get children to Holy Communion. The policy would be a discretionary one and depend upon deep sensitivity to the needs of individual children as they grow within the Christian community. Adequate preparation and continuing nurture would be required. It would be important too that there should be a rich and highly valued sacramental life in the particular Methodist Society in which the child was growing. It would be important that the child and parents concerned were made aware that all churches may not be accustomed to child communicants. Some prior enquiry may be the only safeguard against a child being refused communion when visiting another church after becoming used to receiving it.

2. The status of full membership of Society should be made available with the same sensitivity to personal growth. The suitable form for recognising this status is debatable. It could be maintained that the present service for Reception into Full Membership should be used. Others might consider that it would be better, following adequate preparation, for the person simply to be placed on the membership roll and for his new status to be expressed liturgically in the Covenant Service. On this matter a way might become clear if such a policy were pursued.

5. A Third View:

Both the views outlined above presuppose the maintenance of a considerable interval, whether shorter or longer, between a baptism administered in infancy and an admission to communion in later years. There was, however, a third view represented in the Faith and Order Committee. Recognising the fact that, historically, the separation between baptism and communion came about in more or less accidental ways, this third view sees the closest possible relation, theologically and existentially, between the two Gospel sacraments: the holy communion is the continuing feeding of the Christian life begun in baptism, and baptism is properly followed without interval by regular and continuing communion. In order to bring baptism and communion together, two alternative steps are possible. First: if it be judged right to administer baptism to infants of the tenderest age, then (it may be argued) communion also should be given throughout *infancy*, childhood and the adult life of the persons so baptized (unless such a person should come voluntarily to absent himself from communion). This is, generally speaking, the practice followed in the Orthodox Churches, which administer communion to infants who have received water baptism-with-chrisamation. Of those Methodists who are persuaded that baptism and communion should be brought together, perhaps the majority would be in favour of taking rather the second way to achieve this end: holding that communion is better not received before the presence of some degree of personally professed faith, they might prefer to let baptism also wait until that point; and they might see such baptism upon profession of faith as corresponding to the most clearly discernible practice of baptism in the New

Testament. No matter whether they prefer the first or the second of the two solutions just indicated, supporters of the view that baptism and communion should be brought together recognise that an important change would be taking place in Methodist practice if either of the two solutions were to become the recommended pattern of initiation in the Methodist Church, or even if either or both were to become permissible practices alongside the maintenance of the current practice whereby a considerable interval, whether shorter or longer, usually elapses between baptism and admission to communion. They would, therefore, welcome a thorough examination, at a fundamental level, of the whole question of the theology and practice of initiation in the Methodist Church.

Recommendation

Methodism has endeavoured to retain both a 'churchly' and 'societary', outlook and practice. The difficulty of doing this is seen in the matter under discussion. We believe that the difference of view on this matter found in the Faith and Order Committee will also be found in the Conference and throughout the Methodist Church. Therefore the Committee asks Conference to accept this statement as an account of the issues involved and to commend it for study. The Committee does not wish to stress either the values or the disadvantages of flexibility and experiment to the exclusion of the other; and recognising that the present custom of Methodism is to avoid excessive rigidity in such matters it recommends the Conference to take no constitutional action in the matter.

(Minutes 1975, pp. 49-53)