

CONVERSION AND BAPTISM: THE PASTORAL PROBLEMS (1981)

The Conference of 1980 in its Ministerial Session, in the course of dealing with a particular question, affirmed that the practice of baptizing as adults those who have already been baptized as infants is contrary to our practice and implies a view of Baptism incompatible with our doctrines: it directed the Faith and Order Committee to consider the pastoral problems of those baptized in infancy who, through an experience of conversion or renewal of faith, seek appropriate ways of affirming their faith. The committee, having considered the matter, reports as follows.

It is a fundamental principle of the Christian Faith that the rites and sacraments of the Church should reflect and celebrate the religious experience of the individual and the community. Rites that do not correspond with the realities of the life of faith are meaningless and to be avoided. Equally, religious experience that does not find expression in the corporate worship and activity of the Church suffers impoverishment.

Broadly speaking, religious experiences are of two kinds, what one might call the singular, that is to say, those that occur once only in a life-time, such as marriage or a first experience or conversion, and the recurrent, that is to say, those that are regular features of growth, such as forgiveness and other daily experiences of grace. Both kinds need expression, and Christian tradition has not failed in this. Regular worship, including the sacrament of Holy Communion, has represented in word and action the recurrent experiences of believers. Week by week experiences of gratitude, exultation, hope, love, concern, need, aspiration, and so on, are expressed in our services; and the critical points in the life of faith are similarly marked by special rites.

For a long time those special rites have, for most Christians, formed a simple progress of four elements: baptism to celebrate entry into the family of God, confirmation to celebrate personal commitment, marriage to celebrate a change of status and responsibility, and the last rites to celebrate hope in the presence of death. In between these critical points the regular worship of the church supplied every need. For centuries this simple pattern proved broadly satisfactory, though there has been much discussion and a great variety of usage in relation to the first two elements.

The essence of the problem is that an experience of renewal may come at any time and the common pattern hardly allows for this. Not only is conversion in midlife a far from rare phenomenon, but adolescence itself is today greatly extended, and an adolescent may experience radical renewal years after being made a full member of the Methodist Church. It is natural that those who have such an experience should seek to celebrate it in an appropriate way, that is by introducing another service into the series.

The actual rite to which many who have an experience of renewal of faith are attracted is baptism by immersion; and their reasons are not hard to discover. The rite is ancient and scriptural; it has a dramatic quality that befits a radical experience; the symbolism of submersion and emergence represents the new birth; there is an opportunity for personal profession of faith.

For those who have not been baptized already this rite presents no problems. It is indeed provided for in the Methodist Service Book (see pp. A27-41). Contrary to popular assumption there is no Methodist objection to baptism by immersion. The

reason that immersion is not the common method is simply that most baptisms are of babies for whom immersion is not suitable.

A problem arises when those who have been baptized already ask for a rite of immersion after a radical experience of renewal. The difficulty is partly pastoral and partly theological. From a pastoral point of view the apparent repetition of baptism is likely to disturb those who have been baptized as children, who have accepted the common pattern as sufficient, and who have come to the new life in Christ by a gradual experience of conversion. There is a danger that two categories of Methodist will emerge, formally distinguished from each other, the once-baptized and the twice-baptized.

The doctrinal difficulties are equally serious. Though some elements in the service of baptism might bear repetition, the representation of entry into the family of God cannot. The acceptance of a rite of immersion of those baptized as infants but newly converted can only mean that they are held not to have entered the family of God before. So this element in infant baptism is, by implication, invalidated. (The reason why some Baptists baptize as believers those who were baptized as infants is simply that they do not regard infant baptism as baptism at all.)

Furthermore the stress on conversion or some similar experience as the ground for the second rite implies, as most who contend for believers' baptism would readily agree, some prerequisite for baptism, namely repentance and faith. Repentance and faith are, of course, the work of the Spirit, so the prerequisite is not a human achievement. Nevertheless most accounts of believers' baptism lay some stress on the candidate's readiness for the rite. The alternative view is more concerned with the divine initiative and the promise of grace, to which repentance and faith are a response.

For these reasons the Methodist Church has resisted the pressure to countenance second baptism. The MSB says firmly, 'no one shall be baptized who is known to have been baptized already', and the Ministerial Session of the Conference of 1980 supported the judgement of the Doctrinal Committee that the practice of baptizing as adults those who had already been baptized as infants was contrary to our practice and implied a view of baptism incompatible with our doctrines.

Nevertheless, the need to mark experience of renewal by appropriate celebration remains. Those who have not been baptized can be baptized, by immersion if they so wish. Those who have been baptized but not confirmed, can be confirmed. Here it is well to note that the rite of confirmation, where it involves the laying on of hands, loses nothing in comparison with believers' baptism. The laying on of hands is also ancient and scriptural, dramatic and symbolic; the use of this sign allows equal opportunity for a personal profession of faith. (The use of the right hand of fellowship, though common in our usage, is less securely grounded in Scripture. The one occurrence of the sign, in Gal. 2.9 is concerned with resolving a dispute rather than giving a blessing.)

The Presbyterian Church of New Zealand, faced with a similar problem, has devised a service which involves the immersion of the worshipper as a sign of entry into new life and self-dedication, but not of baptism. This service has the advantages that it makes use of the vivid symbolism of immersion and that it can be related directly to conversion without denying the fact and significance of infant baptism.

Nonetheless, the following arguments against it must be considered:

1. The relation of the service to confirmation is not clear. Reference is made in the text to previous baptism, but no mention is made of previous or subsequent confirmation. Indeed, at the moment of immersion, the officiating minister says, 'now I confirm to you the . . . gift of God's Spirit.' A reasonable inference from this would be that the service was a substitute for our MSB service of 'Public Reception into Full Membership, or Confirmation'. It is undesirable that the Church should have two different services of confirmation, one for those who enter into the fulness of the life of Christ by a sudden experience and one for those who enter by growth. If the service is not intended as confirmation, it is certainly liable to confusion with it.
2. The service makes use of a familiar ritual action of immersion, but appends to it an unfamiliar and slightly obscure meaning. Many people would misunderstand this ritual and see it as believers' baptism.
3. It is hard to believe that this service would not threaten our theology of infant baptism and, by stressing the believer's experience, cast doubt on the primacy of grace.

So we are left with the problem of those who have a deep experience of renewal after confirmation. None of the services associated with singular experiences is appropriate and available. There remain the services that mark recurrent experiences suitably adapted for the special occasion. Two suggest themselves, Holy Communion and the Covenant Service. Into them extra elements of thanksgiving, profession of faith and testimony can be inserted. The Covenant Service is particularly appropriate where a number of people are concerned, as, for example, at the end of a special mission.

In this matter it is important that the Church should find a safe way between two dangers. On one hand the significance of dramatic conversion must not be minimised. On the other those whose discipleship has not involved such an experience must not be discouraged. Methodist usage has expressed sound doctrine and wise pastoral concern in the past. It is now necessary for us to be sufficiently sympathetic and imaginative in our worship and pastoral care to be able to adapt to the present situation and so, not merely avoid its dangers, but also reap spiritual benefit from what is happening in our midst.

(Agenda 1981, pp. 59-61)

In connection with this report the Conference introduced a new Standing Order, S.O. 800.