

INFANT BAPTISM AND MINISTERIAL DISCIPLINE (1988)

INTRODUCTION:

1. In 1987 the Conference passed the following resolution, presented to it as a Notice of Motion:

‘The Conference directs the Faith & Order Committee to consider whether ministers maybe in Full Connexion with the Conference provided they do not dispute the principle of infant baptism and are willing to commend those who seek baptism for their children to ministers who practice infant baptism, and to present a report to the next Conference.’

2. The Faith & Order Committee believes that the Notice of Motion raises a highly sensitive matter. Since change in our long-established practice would have far-reaching consequences for the whole life of the church and because it would constitute a radical departure from the Methodist Church’s traditional position on this issue, the Faith & Order Committee has taken the view in the following paragraphs that it is incumbent upon those who favour changing our present discipline to provide overwhelming argument to demonstrate why the change should be made. The Committee has examined carefully the arguments in favour of change and has concluded, not only that they are insufficiently persuasive, but also that there are strong positive arguments in favour of maintaining our present discipline.

3. A distinction must be made between two groups of ministers whose resignations have in the past been associated with this issue:

- (i) Those who apart from the question of infant baptism are loyal and committed Methodist ministers and who strongly desire to remain in our ministry.
- (ii) Those for whom the question of infant baptism is only a symptom of their much deeper and wider uneasiness within Methodism. Infant baptism may be the occasion or pretext of their resignation, but not the sole cause.

It would be deeply unjust to suggest that all ministers who refuse to baptise infants fall into this second category. Not all fall within the first.

4. The resolution is about ministers who refuse to baptise infants **in all circumstances**. Such ministers must be distinguished carefully from those who decline the request for baptism on some occasions – when for example there is judged to be insufficient evidence of the parents’ faith or commitment to the church.

This is the reason for S.O. 520 (2) which reads: ‘It is the duty of ministers in full connexion to be willing to baptise infants in appropriate circumstances.’ Consequently, in what follows, when referring to ministers who refuse to baptise infants, the Conference resolution is interpreted as meaning ‘ministers who refuse to baptise infants in all circumstances’.

5. It is not clear whether the intention of the resolution is that S.O. 520 (2) should be revoked. It could be argued that the church should continue to require of ordinands a willingness to baptise infants (as required by the S.O.), allowing a 'conscience clause' only for those who later change their mind. Such a position might, however, be judged to be radically unstable. The implication of the motion appears to be that S.O. 520 (2) should be revoked. Thus, the ordained ministry would be open to those who refuse to baptise infants, and not merely remain open to those who, having been paedobaptist at ordination, later change their minds.

6. Were the Faith & Order Committee to recommend a change in our discipline consideration would necessarily have to be given to the meaning of the phrase in the resolution 'provided they do not dispute the principle of infant baptism'. Presumably the writers of the resolution had **public** disputation in mind, since such ministers are bound to dispute the principle privately. Otherwise they would not be unwilling to baptise infants. But what constitutes **public** disputation, and what constitutes a **disputation**? Arguably, the simple refusal to baptise infants constitutes in itself a disputation of the principle of infant baptism. Since the issue could conceivably be tested in the courts of the land it would need to be clarified as much as possible.

ARGUMENTS IN FAVOUR OF A CHANGE IN OUR DISCIPLINE

1 The Argument from Compassion:

Ministers who are forced to leave our church because of a changed conviction over this issue face considerable suffering. They and their families confront domestic upheaval and probably financial hardship. There is the loss of colleagues and the support and friendship of a church in which they have served. A compassionate church should not subject ministers and their families to all this for this one cause. To deny the exercise of a ministry on these grounds alone, when in all other regards Methodist belief and practice is accepted, is insensitive and unjust.

2 The Argument from Loss:

Excellent ministers who should be enriching the life of our church have been lost to us because of our requirement that ministers must be willing to baptise infants in appropriate circumstances. A change in our discipline would eliminate this loss.

3 The Argument from the 'Boundaries of Faith':

It cannot be argued that commitment to infant Baptism is central to Christian faith, as is belief in God or belief in Christ. The church has no right to exclude from its ministry those who refuse a practice which is not part of the kernel of our belief – that which is not unambiguously attested in scripture and which has no place in the ancient creeds or Councils of the Church.

4 The Argument from Toleration:

Methodism is a 'broad church' which embraces considerable diversity in belief and practice. Wesley's sermons on **A Caution Against Biogtry** and **The Catholic Spirit** are among our foundation documents. It is inconsistent with the pluralism of our church to adopt a 'hard line' over this issue. Our church includes those who

differ radically over the authority of scripture, atonement theology, sexual ethics, etc. There should be a similar acceptance of diversity over baptismal practice.

5 The Argument from Disruption in the Church's Life:

When a minister feels obliged to resign the appointment will be unfilled at least until the end of the Connexional year. More significantly, distress will be caused in the local congregation by those who love and respect the minister and appreciate his/her ministry. There will be sadness that the minister is no longer able to serve among us. All this would be avoided if our discipline were to be relaxed. It may, however be acknowledged that under our present discipline ministers often agree to remain to the end of the Connexional year in order not to cause any greater disturbance than is strictly necessary.

6 The Argument from Ecumenism:

It is inevitable that the 'coming great church' will contain two patterns of Christian initiation – i.e. the one based on infant baptism and the other based on believers' baptism. In recognition of this our church should tolerate a similar duality today. In many areas the denominational configuration of church life and ordained ministry is being broken down. Sometimes the 'mood' of a local church is turning away from the paedobaptist position, perhaps partly because members of the congregation have roots in traditions other than Methodism. We should anticipate the character of the 'coming great church' by allowing ministers who refuse to baptise infants to remain in Full Connexion.

7 The Argument from the Experience of the URC:

The United Reformed Church, by including the Churches of Christ, embraced a dual practice and this works without difficulty. The experience of this church could and should be ours.

8 The Argument from the Deed of Union:

In its statement of our doctrinal standards the Deed of Union refers only to the Sacrament of **Baptism**. (Clause 30). The practice of **infant** baptism is spoken of simply as our **usage** (Clause 33[i]). We are guilty of inconsistency with our foundation documents if we require our ministers to adopt what is stated as being merely a usage, and not a doctrine.

9 The Argument from Comparison with Lay People:

Whilst members of the Methodist Church are exhorted to 'present their children to Christ in baptism'¹ there is no question of discipline of those who believe it is right for them to wait until their children are able to answer for themselves. There appears to be an inconsistency in the position of a church which allows Methodist parents to make this decision for their own children, but does not allow ministers to make it for their ministerial practice. Why is the freedom given to members not extended to ministers? Likewise, it is strange that we allow ministers to withhold baptism from their own children, but insist that they baptise other people's children on pain of exclusion from our ministry. Similarly, those who decide not to have their own children baptised may feel that their convictions are being slighted by a church which insists that ministers be willing to baptise children in appropriate circumstances.

10 The Argument from the Unreasonableness of the Baptist Alternative:

We must resist the argument that if ministers refuse to baptise infants, then they are baptists and should be expected to leave our ministry and transfer to that of the Baptist Church. This oversimplifies a very complex situation and reflects a lack of pastoral sensitivity. Many such ministers wish to remain Methodists and have no desire to join another church. It is unreasonable and insensitive to suggest people may move easily from one church to another simply on the basis of one issue, and it is wrong to suggest that the Baptist Church is defined simply with regard to this one issue.

11 The Argument from Analogy with Remarriage:

Ministers are allowed the privilege of a 'conscious clause' when asked to remarry divorcees. (S.O. 830) A similar provision should exist with regard to infant baptism. The church is being inconsistent in allowing it in the one case, but withholding it in the other.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST A CHANGE IN OUR DISCIPLINE

Whilst acknowledging that some of the arguments against our present discipline have some force, the Faith & Order Committee is for the following reasons unconvinced by the case for change.

1 Response to the 'Argument from Compassion':

It is agreed that considerable anguish may be caused when ministers have to leave us. A compassionate church must be acutely sensitive to this and do everything possible to minimise suffering. The 'argument from compassion' does constitute a *prima facie* case against our present practice. Without further argument it would leave the onus of proof with those who wish to maintain our current discipline.

2 Response to the 'Argument from Loss':

It must be agreed that it is profoundly to be regretted when committed ministers who have served the church well have to leave. We deeply deplore their loss to our church. It must be insisted, however, that loss will not be eliminated merely by relaxing our discipline. Any policy adopted will alienate some. Arguably there will be those who will resign from our ministry should our discipline be relaxed; others who might otherwise offer for our ministry might instead offer for that of another church. Furthermore, and probably much more significantly, experience shows that there is a loss of lay people when ministers refuse to baptise children.

3 Response to the argument from the 'Boundaries of our Faith':

A twofold response may be offered:

(i) The issue is not what is or is not central to our faith, but rather what it is reasonable for a church to require of its ordained ministry. The premise of the argument may be accepted, i.e. that although infant baptism is profoundly expressive of Methodism's conviction about the prevenience of the grace of God, it is clearly subordinate to central beliefs about God in Christ. It is not part of the kernel as these beliefs are.

A church, however, is entitled to lay down certain requirements of its ordained ministry and cannot be expected to accept into its ministry people who deviate from its discipline and practice in all respects except those that relate to the absolute fundamentals of the Faith. There is a common understanding, implicit or explicit, that ministers will, for example, conduct worship on the Circuit Plan, preside at meetings of Managing Trustees, attend Circuit meetings and District synods, preside at celebrations of the Lord's Supper, conduct Covenant services, funerals and weddings, prepare people for confirmation, be subject to the itinerant system and stationing, etc. Of course, all these expectations have to be justified. The church is answerable to the Gospel, to reason and to the demands of tolerance and compassion. The fact remains that a church is entitled to define requirements for its ordained ministry, and it is reasonable that a willingness to offer infant baptism be included among these things. What, it may be asked, would be the response of our church if a minister, in like fashion, refused to conduct Communion services or to prepare people for reception into full membership?

(ii) The argument easily backfires upon its exponents. If the issue of infant baptism is claimed to be insufficiently significant to serve as grounds for exclusion from our ministry, why is it regarded by its opponents as being an issue over which they feel so strongly that they refuse to offer it to committed members who in good faith believe in it and request it for their children? If its opponents are to be allowed to regard this issue as being of such importance, then so also must its supporters.

4 Response to the 'Argument from Toleration':

It must be allowed that this argument is a strong one, and as in the case of the 'argument from compassion' the onus of justification lies with those who support the present discipline. Two points are therefore offered in response:

(i) Despite the rich diversity within the Methodist Church there are bound to be limits beyond which belief and practice is unacceptable. As John Locke pointed out,² the State has a particular responsibility to exercise wide toleration since no citizen can escape being subject to the State. By contrast a church is entitled to have a stricter control over belief and practice because people are not bound to be part of it. It is acknowledged that this kind of argument could be used to support an unhealthy denominationalism. It is, however, the belief of the Faith & Order Committee that infant baptism is so central to Methodist church life that it is difficult to understand how a minister can minister among us without being willing to practice it. Whilst every church is subservient to the Gospel and has a duty to exercise toleration, it also has every right to lay down obligations and expectations of its ordained ministry.

Thus, Methodist ministers are reasonably expected to baptise infants as they are reasonably expected to preside at the Lord's Supper. Furthermore since S. O. 520 (2) has been in existence for over a decade now, there can be no doubt as to what is expected of a minister in this matter.

(ii) Perhaps a more significant response to the 'argument from toleration' claims that it is not a church which requires its ministers to baptise infants that is being guilty of intolerance and lack of graciousness; it is rather these ministers themselves. This is because such ministers refuse to act in their representative capacity in offering to their members what in good conscience those members wish for their children, and which is a central part of Methodist practice. They are showing intolerance to paedobaptists within their congregations by refusing to offer

baptism when it is requested. The church tolerates a minister's own reservations about infant baptism. It tolerates a minister's decision not to have his or her own children baptised. But it believes it is justified in refusing to tolerate a minister's refusal to offer the sacrament to loyal members who request it. Thus, those who contrast the church's 'hard line' on infant baptism with our acceptance of diversity over doctrines of atonement, approaches to scripture, etc., miss the point. The issue is not the existence of diversity of viewpoint. It is rather the refusal of ministers to exercise a full ministry to their congregations by declining to baptise infants. Paradoxically then, our present discipline preserves rather than limits proper diversity and tolerance within our church.

5 Response to the 'Argument from Disruption':

It must be allowed that this argument has force. A minister cannot resign without the church feeling pain. On the other hand, it must be insisted that there will also be hurt, confusion and distress, if congregations have ministers who refuse to baptise infants. Where ministers so refuse there are bound to be problems in the local church – whether our discipline is applied or not. The difficulties will vary from one situation to another. What is clear, however, is that we cannot eliminate local difficulties merely by relaxing our discipline. Whatever position the church takes on this issue there is going to be pain. In view of our tradition it is reasonable to believe that there will be more pain if ministers who refuse to baptise infants are permitted to remain in pastoral charge than is the case with our present discipline.

6 Response to the 'Argument from Ecumenism':

It is true that if there is to be a 'coming great church' it will probably practice both believers' and infant baptism. This consideration does not necessarily mean, however, that Methodism should, irrespective of its ethos, doctrine and history, change its present practice. Furthermore, this argument – although advanced against our present discipline – is really more effectively deployed in support of it, since on the premise that a church should offer both patterns of Christian initiation (i.e. paedobaptism and believers' baptism) critics of our present discipline proceed to argue that individual ministers should be allowed to offer only one. A more reasonable conclusion would be that if a church is to offer both patterns (as in fact our church does), so also should ministers acting in their representative capacity. Certainly, there are a few Methodist congregations in which the mood is against paedobaptism although we must beware of judging the ethos of a congregation on the basis of a few vocal members. Again, even if the majority of a congregation is of the believers' baptist position, provision still has to be made for the paedobaptists within it and even if there are some local churches that would be content with a minister who refused to baptise infants it is doubtful if there are any such 'sections' within the Connexion.

7 Response to the 'Argument from the Experience of the URC':

The experience of the URC is hardly relevant to our situation since the Methodist Church is a Connexion with a system of stationing, whilst the URC has a strong congregational element, congregations sometimes having their own distinctive character. Thus, within that church those who refuse to baptise infants will not normally be appointed to paedobaptist congregations.

8 Response to the ‘Argument from the Deed of Union’:

This argument begs the question that the writers of the Deed carefully distinguished doctrine from usage, believing that the latter did not express the former and that it had lower significance than the former. It also fails to recognise that the Conference has consistently, in its interpretations of ‘our doctrines’, regarded infant baptism as profoundly expressive of our central beliefs. Hence, there is in the Methodist Church a weighty theology of **infant** baptism.

9 Response to the ‘Argument from Comparison with Laypeople’:

This argument entirely misses the point. The issue is not about ministers who decide to withhold baptism from their children. Such ministers are not disciplined. The issue concerns rather ministers who refuse to baptise other people’s children in appropriate circumstances, thereby failing to act in their representative capacity by offering a full ministry to their congregations. Furthermore, if the Church insists that ministers baptise children this does not mean that the Church is slighting those parents who do not seek baptism for their children. The issue is not what parents may or may not decide for their children. It is rather the obligation of ministers to offer to their congregations the sacraments accepted by our church and according to our usage.

10 Response to the ‘Argument from the Unreasonableness of the Baptist Alternative’:

Ministers rarely seek ordination in another church with only one issue in mind. Other deeply held convictions make it unlikely that identification with another Church will be simple to make. The committee accepts the spirit of this argument. In no way must one make light of the prospect of a minister having to resign and seek service in the ordained ministry of another church. In view of the arguments advanced in this report, however, this consideration is not alone a decisive one against our present discipline.

11 Response to the ‘Argument from Analogy with Remarriage’:

It is the unsatisfactoriness of this analogy that leads us to one of the central issues. Infant baptism is not like a tooth, which once removed from the life of the local church would leave everything else exactly as it is. It expresses profoundly much of what Methodists believe about the prevenience of the grace of God and the character of Christian community. It is an integral part of a local church’s mission and programme of Christian nurture. It is therefore difficult to see how a minister can refuse to baptise **infants** and serve as minister of such a local church. Is the font – small because it is designed for infant baptisms – to be removed from the sanctuary when such a minister leads worship? How are such ministers to relate to the work of the Cradle Roll secretary? Will they regard the children of the Sunday School as part of the church, and if so why will they not baptise them? If they are to be regarded as ‘little pagans’³ how will such ministers relate to the Sunday School teachers who regard them as being part of the church? Can such ministers conduct the confirmation service of those baptised as infants where the words spoken are: ‘Beloved in Christ, at your Baptism . . .’⁴ It may be acknowledged that with goodwill and wide sympathies these problems may sometimes be overcome. The fact remains, however, as the place of the font in our arrangement of sanctuary furniture indicates, infant baptism is central to the life, mission and doctrine of our

church. It cannot therefore be separated from the rest of a ministry and simply given over to a colleague as the resolution assumes.

Further, the resolution might be taken as implying a mechanical view of sacramental efficacy in that it speaks of infant baptism in isolation from the life and mission of the church over which the refusing minister has pastoral charge. It might also be taken to imply a view of the work of the ordained ministry divorced from the ministry of the congregation as a whole. It is precisely for these reasons that the analogy between baptism and the remarriage of divorced persons break down. Infant baptism is integral to a local church's life and mission. The remarriage of those whose previous marriage has been dissolved, whilst it may be thought of as an important expression of the church's care, is not.

Along these lines it must be asked how in churches under the care of ministers who refuse to baptise infants there is to be proper provision for teaching and preaching about infant baptism. According to the proposed resolution the minister will not dispute the principle of infant baptism; but who is to explain and defend it?

In addition to responding, as above, to the case in favour of change, the Committee offers the following further considerations in support of our present discipline.

The Legitimate Expectations of Congregations:

It is right to be sensitive to the convictions of ministers who feel unable to baptise children. On the other hand, we must also be sensitive to Methodist members who desire baptism for their children. They are encouraged to seek it in our official statements and they have a legitimate expectation that their minister will baptise them. They have every right to believe that a Methodist minister appointed by the Conference has an obligation to offer the sacraments recognised by that church in accordance with its usage. They might justifiably feel hurt and rejected when asked to 'go elsewhere' for what they believe is rightfully theirs within the local church. There is in referral to a colleague the clear implication that the referring minister does not approve of what is being done. The Committee accepts that in a responsibly and wisely handled pastoral situation these difficulties may be minimised. The legitimate expectations of congregations, however, remain and must not be neglected.

Practical Difficulties:

The practical difficulties implicit in the proposals are considerable and should not be ignored. The proposal envisages parents directed towards a colleague by ministers who refuse to baptise infants. Presumably the colleague will be responsible for the baptismal preparation as well as for the conduct of the service. This will place an additional burden upon the colleague – and all ministers are hard-pressed as it is. Furthermore, since most Methodists wish their children to be baptised in the church they attend, the Circuit Plan will have to be made with provision for ministers conducting services in churches not within their pastoral care more frequently than would otherwise be the case. These difficulties are not insuperable. The extent of them should not, however, be underestimated. Nor should their potential for creating ill-feeling. Just as lay people have a right to expect that their minister will baptise infants, so ministers also have a right to expect that their colleagues will take responsibility for the whole range of ministerial duties. The Committee acknowledges that if the principle of our present discipline were shown to be mistaken, then the Church would have to live with the

practical difficulties involved in changing it. Since, however, the Committee believes that principle to be sound it is right that attention be drawn to the practical problems that would ensue were it to be changed.

The Minister as a Representative Person:

One point implicit in the arguments thusfar is sufficiently important to be made separately and explicitly. Ministers play a leading part in a church life which is not entirely of their own making. As representative persons they cannot avoid being associated with practices and customs of which they may not fully approve. These may include the local traditions at funerals, the pattern of worship at Sunday School Anniversaries, the requirement that the Superintendent minister or the Superintendent's deputy chair the meeting of the Managing Trustees, the use of individual glasses at the Lord's Supper, and a host of other things. These may be trivial examples compared with infant baptism, but that does not affect the point. Ministers must serve the church as it is and not simply as they would wish it to be. Likewise they must minister to people where they are and as they are – including those who are convinced paedobaptists.

Whilst no minister can be a 'time server', neglecting the prophetic and teaching ministry, at the same time an individualism which refuses to bend for the sake of the wider life of the church or to respond pastorally to people in their diversity, is equally unacceptable. Ministers who refuse to baptise children may be failing to recognise the duties incumbent upon ministers when acting in a representative capacity. It is one thing to have reservations about infant baptism and to believe that believers' baptism should be the norm. It is quite another to refuse infant baptism to loyal members in good standing who believe in it and request it for their children.

The Problem of Stationing:

A change in our discipline would have profound implications for stationing – probably greater than can at present be fully envisaged. The Methodist Church is distinctive in that through stationing:

- (i) ministers are guaranteed a station if there is one available, and
- (ii) circuits are expected to accept whomsoever the Conference will send.

This places obligations upon ministers to exercise a ministry of a catholic character acceptable throughout the Connexion. It also places upon the church the obligation to station only those who exercise such a ministry.

In present circumstances every effort is made by the Stationing Committee to match minister and circuit to each other taking account of a wide variety of considerations. It might be claimed that that is all that would be required if our present baptismal discipline were to be relaxed. The following kind of acute dilemma might none the less arise. A group of ministers who refuse to baptise infants have no appointments and so ask to be stationed. Does the Conference have the moral right to station these ministers in circuits which seek ministers who will baptise infants? Indeed are there are circuits which do not? Can a minister accept the security of the stationing system without its responsibilities?

Again, suppose an area of the country has a high concentration of ministers unwilling to baptise infants. Is the Stationing Committee to move, against their own

wishes and against the wishes of their circuits, ministers who are willing to baptise infants in order to make provision for this sacrament?

Furthermore, it must not be forgotten that the norm in Methodism is not the geographically small circuit with five churches, three ministers and four supernumeraries. In many areas ministers are 'thin on the ground'. Many circuits have only one or two ministers. It is difficult to see how ordained ministry could be sustained in some areas unless ministers are willing to baptise infants. The Stationing Committee could thus be faced with insoluble problems if our discipline were to be changed.

Conclusion:

The Committee recommends no change in present ministerial discipline in relation to the baptism of infants.

Notes

- 1 *Methodist Service Book A2*
- 2 John Locke, *A Letter on Toleration*, Edited by J. W. Gough. OUP. (1968) 79ff.
- 3 D. M. Baillie, *The Theology of the Sacraments*, Faber (1957) 81.
- 4 *Methodist Service Book A21*

RESOLUTIONS

- 1 (Ministerial Session)

The Conference adopts the report.

- 2 (Representative Session)

The Representative Session of the Conference takes note of the decision of the Ministerial Session in relation to Resolution 1.

(Agenda 1988, pp.807-817)

The Ministerial Session adopted Resolution 1 and agreed to 'a report of the discussion on Infant Baptism and Ministerial Discipline being given to the Representative Session'.

In the Representative Session, Resolution 2 was withdrawn, and the Conference adopted the following:

'The Conference in its Representative Session adopts the report.'