

STATEMENT ON HOLY BAPTISM (1952)

PREAMBLE

In issuing this Statement the Conference Committee does not seek to impose on the Methodist people any one of the varying interpretations of the Sacrament of Baptism which have been held amongst us. It is no dogmatic definition that is offered in this document; still less is it a Confession of faith by which orthodoxy or loyalty might be tested. Our purpose is primarily practical. This document moves forward to certain practical recommendations at the end. The purpose is to make sure that the use of this Sacrament shall never be casual, thoughtless, or unenlightened; to enable the Methodist people to appreciate the meaning of Baptism, as the practice emerges in the Primitive Church; and to face the fresh problems arising when parents who have only a nominal connection with the Christian Church present their children for Infant Baptism.

(I) THE OBLIGATION OF BAPTISM FOR THE METHODIST PEOPLE

The Methodist Conference, since the Union of 1932, has by no means left the Methodist people without guidance on the obligation of Baptism. The Deed of Union itself declares as one of our doctrinal standards, that 'The Methodist Church recognizes two sacraments, namely, Baptism and 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.' It also states: 'According to Methodist usage the Sacrament of Baptism is administered to infants, and regular oversight should be given by the local Church and its Minister to all who have been dedicated to God by this sign.' Among the Committees appointed by the Uniting Conference was one to revise the Book of Offices, and another to prepare a special Statement on Infant Baptism. Both Committees concluded their work in 1936, when their documents were finally approved by the Conference.

'The Order of Service for the Baptism of Such as are of Riper Years' begins with the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles' Creed, and declares in the words of Scripture that Baptism is unto the remission of sins, and promises the gift of the Holy Spirit. One of the questions asked of the candidate for Baptism is: 'Thus having pledged yourself to Christ, will you seek to fulfil the ministry He appoints you in His Church as a member of His Body?' Immediately after the Baptism the Minister says: 'We receive this person into the congregation of Christ's Church'; and this is followed by a prayer 'that he may have grace to build up the Body of Christ.'

The Order of Service for the Baptism of Infants repeats the promise of Christ's redeeming grace 'to you and to your children, and to all that are afar off', and the promise of the Holy Spirit. At the climax of the service the Minister declares that we receive the person baptized into the congregation of Christ's flock.

Both services are therefore services of reception into the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. The Statement on Infant Baptism of the Conference of 1936, however, declares that the child's membership is necessarily incomplete, but that by Baptism the child is brought into the household of faith, and should be regarded as remaining therein, in the hope and expectation of the time when he will personally receive Jesus Christ as his Saviour and Lord. The statement concludes:

‘We assert in common with the general body of the Church of Christ, that a solemn obligation to Christ, the Church, and the child, rests upon parents to present their children to Christ in Baptism, and thus to honour the ancient ordinance whereby they are joined to the visible community of Christ’s people.’

There can, therefore, be no reasonable doubt that every member of the Methodist Church is under a solemn obligation to submit in penitence and faith to the ordinance of Christian Baptism, if for any reason he has not been baptized, and also to bring his children to be baptized.

The spread of unbelief, indifference to religion, and nominal Christianity in Western Europe has created a difficult situation in relation to the administration of Infant Baptism. The mixed character of a community which is neither Christian nor pagan gives rise to acute practical problems. It is notorious that many parents who do not themselves attend Church, seek baptism for their children, often with the most vague and erroneous ideas about its meaning, and with no intention of accepting the solemn obligations involved.

We are called to proclaim that the Gospel is for all men, that in Christ all were created and in Him all have been redeemed. When non-Christian parents bring their children for Baptism we are presented with an evangelical opportunity which we may not neglect. Yet we dare not pass lightly over or omit the solemn responsibilities involved in Holy Baptism. Therefore the Methodist Church in this country offers Baptism to all, and denies it to none, whose parents or guardians, after due instruction in their meaning, are willing to make the solemn promises contained in the service of Holy Baptism in the Book of Offices.

(II) THE NEW TESTAMENT DOCTRINE OF BAPTISM AND ITS VITAL CONNEXION WITH JUSTIFYING FAITH

From the Day of Pentecost onwards Baptism was the symbol of entry into the Church of Christ.⁶⁶ There is insufficient evidence for the assertion that infants were baptized in New Testament times, but on the other hand it is nowhere stated that their baptism had to be postponed until they became believers in the full sense. In any case those writers from whom we learn the New Testament’s doctrine of Baptism clearly have the Baptism of believers in mind.

Jesus was believed by the early Church to have commanded the Baptism of all converts,⁶⁷ and His own Baptism⁶⁸ was the example of Christian Baptism. According to the Evangelists it was not simply the ‘Baptism of John’, but Baptism by water and the Spirit, and the Voice that He heard, with its strong reminiscence of the Servant Songs in Isaiah,⁶⁹ shows that in submitting to Baptism by John He was accepting the role of the Suffering Servant of the Lord. Thus it became to Him the symbol of His suffering and death, and of His triumph over death which released the powers of the

⁶⁶ Acts ii.38

⁶⁷ Matthew xxviii.19. The unhesitating practice by the early Church of water Baptism from the first, in spite of the words of John the Baptist implying that it would be superseded (Mark i.8, and parallel passages; cf. Acts i.5; xi.16), strongly suggests that this belief was correct.

⁶⁸ Mark i.9-11, Matthew iii. 13-17, Luke iii.21, 2.

⁶⁹ E.g., of Isaiah xlii.1; ‘Behold my servant, whom I uphold; my chosen, in whom my soul delighteth.’

Kingdom of God to all mankind.⁷⁰ Further, the Baptism of Jesus is directly associated in all the Gospel narratives not only with descent of the Spirit but also with the acknowledgement of His divine Sonship. The triple association of Baptism with Christ's death, with the gift of the Holy Spirit and with 'Sonship,' also forms part of the apostolic teaching about Christian Baptism.

Thus, with the Baptism, death, and resurrection of Jesus in his mind, St Paul sets forth Christian Baptism, which is also by water and the Spirit, as signifying our dying to sin and our rising again to the life of righteousness through communion with Christ.⁷¹ At the same time he closely connects it with the sonship of God which is ours because we are in Christ.⁷² In the same way St John relates it to the birth from above through which we become sons of God by the activity of the Holy Spirit.⁷³ Baptism is an active expression of the Gospel of Grace. By our incorporation into Christ we become members of His Body, which is the Church, and inherit the powers of the New Age which He inaugurated; and Baptism is the sign of that incorporation.⁷⁴

The New Testament speaks also of the two Covenants. Under the Old Covenant children of Abraham were heirs by birth of the promises of God and members of His Chosen People; and their membership was sealed by circumcision.⁷⁵ Under the New Covenant we are born anew of the Spirit; and become by repentance and faith members of the New Israel, the Church; and the seal of our membership is Baptism.⁷⁶

The New Testament plainly teaches that we are justified by the grace of God through faith.⁷⁷ It is apparent, too, that in New Testament teaching and practice, faith in Christ is followed by Baptism.⁷⁸ This faith (itself a divine gift), is, in the New Testament linked with Baptism in the most intimate possible way.⁷⁹ Yet in this Sacrament of the Gospel it is God's action which is primary. In it God comes and gives Himself to us, and claims us for His own. Our action is the answer of faith, but the emphasis must always lie not on what we do, but on what God has done and is waiting to do for us in Christ. Christ Himself is the minister of Baptism, and the Sacrament is made effectual through the gracious working of God, whereby what He accomplished once for all in the death and resurrection of Christ is more and more realised in the life of those who increasingly make the divine gift their own.⁸⁰

(III) INFANT BAPTISM AND THE GRACE OF GOD

The New Testament doctrine of Baptism is primarily concerned with the Baptism of believers. In what sense is it possible to understand the riches of the promises which in the New Testament are comprised in Baptism, when the recipient of these promises is an infant?

⁷⁰ Luke xii.50, Mark x.38.

⁷¹ Romans vi.3-7, Galatians iii.27.

⁷² Galatians iii.26.

⁷³ John iii.3-5

⁷⁴ 1 Corinthians 12-13

⁷⁵ Luke iii.8, Philippians iii 5.

⁷⁶ Acts ii. 38; 1 Corinthians xii.13.

⁷⁷ Romans iii. 22-4, Ephesians ii. 8, etc, etc

⁷⁸ Acts ii, 38; viii. 36, 38; xvi. 31-3, etc., etc

⁷⁹ Cf. Romans ii. 21-8 with v.3-6.

⁸⁰ Cf. Romans vi. 3-8 with Ephesians ii. 4-6.

These spiritual benefits are summed up in the word 'Grace'. Grace should never be understood as a mere quality or disposition, but as the redeeming activity of God in Jesus Christ our Lord, through the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. The essential mark of the Gospel sacrament is not what we do, but what God does. Just as Jesus welcomed the little children in the days of His flesh, so in Baptism now He receives them into His company. Baptism is God's authoritative acknowledgement of them as His children. In Baptism Christ Himself through His Church takes the children in His arms and declares what He has done and what He will do for them. Thus they come to belong to His people and receive access to the teaching, the worship, and the example of Christians. In this sense they have entered the realm of grace. Grace is the Love of God, spontaneous and unearned, active in Christ, and therefore in His Church, for the redemption of all men from the habit and bondage of sin.

Grace comes before faith, and awakens faith. In that sense it is always 'prevenient'. The Sacrament is never administered without the response of faith, the faith of the assembly of believing people, who dedicate the child to Him. Baptism signifies the act of God, whereby He shows Himself graciously calling forth the faith of His Church, and setting the Child amongst them as an inheritor of His promises. But the conscious response in the infant is always delayed. This fact should not prevent us from recognising that the love of God, active and redemptive, is the thing signified and present in the sacrament of the Baptism of infants, and will be accessible to every child brought up in the fellowship of believing people. The practice of Infant Baptism is in itself an impressive witness to the truth that the Grace of God comes before our response, and is wholly apart from our deserts.

But though the child baptized in infancy is an heir to the promises of God, he does not always or inevitably claim his inheritance. As he comes to riper years, a continued working of the Holy Spirit is necessary, if he is to give any conscious response. He must see his sin and his need. He must put all his trust and confidence in Christ, both for his life here and for his hope of life everlasting. This full response, this saving faith, he cannot produce in his own unaided strength. It is the work of God, the Holy Spirit, and is essential to life in Christ. Whether this work is called 'Conversion', or 'the New Birth', whether it is regarded as sudden or gradual, or as both process and crisis, it is true that without the gift of saving faith those baptized in infancy can never attain to their privileged life as sons of God. While Methodists recognise that Christ is the true Minister in Baptism and that therein Christ sets the child in the company of His people, they also declare that the personal appropriation of the promises of Christ by the child should be prayed for and expected.

Both Sacraments point forward to the end, to the final consummation. As we partake of the Lord's Supper we proclaim the Lord's death 'until He come'. So, according to St Paul, Baptism proclaims the death and burial of the old self with Christ, and our rising again with Him to a new life in which we ever look forward to His final manifestation in glory. This promise is not only for those who are of riper years. It is also for little children.

The Methodist Church believes the Baptism of Infants to be in accordance with the mind of Christ. Not only is it sanctioned by the practice of the Church since very early times; it proclaims and offers the grace of God, who is eternally active for the salvation of all men, and receives even the youngest into that realm where His promises are gloriously fulfilled. Sin is not simply a matter of individual wrong-doing; each one of us is also involved in the sin of the world, in the community of evil. When an infant is

baptized, he is received into the new Israel of God, which is God's answer to the community of evil.

(IV) PRACTICAL CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

(a) Baptism is an obligation resting upon everyone desiring to be a member of the Methodist Church, and where it has not taken place in infancy, provision is made in the Book of Offices for a service of 'Baptism for such as are of Riper Years'. It is important that those being prepared for Church Membership should be asked whether or not they have been baptized. If they were not baptized as infants, it should be expected that they present themselves for the service of Baptism for those of riper years before being received into Church Membership.

Under the conditions of the Mission Field, it is recognised that Baptism for those who have reached years of discretion is likely to be a normal Methodist practice.

(b) In common with the general body of the Church of Christ, we affirm that a solemn obligation to Christ, the Church, and the child rests upon parents to present their children to Christ in Baptism, which claims for them all the benefits of His redeeming work and signifies their admission into the visible community of His Church.

We likewise affirm the joint responsibility of the Church and the parents or guardians of the child presented for Baptism for the due honouring of the pledges solemnly undertaken in this Sacrament; and we emphasise the great importance of such procedure as shall ensure that, so far as lies in our power, the undertaking shall be entered into with understanding and sincere purpose, since otherwise the Sacrament may be degraded to the level of mere social custom or superstition.

We are presented with cause for serious misgiving by those parents who request Baptism for their children but themselves acknowledge no vital relationship with the Christian Church. In view of the considerable number of these today, we recommend a certain normal procedure as highly desirable. In the Methodist Church, with its widely varying local conditions, there are difficulties in obtaining detailed uniformity, but we strongly urge the attempt to follow as faithfully as possible the principles set forth in the following recommendations. Their purpose is to ensure that the use of this Sacrament shall never be casual or unenlightened, and that the consideration set out in this Statement shall be safeguarded to the utmost of our power. The due and proper administration of Holy Baptism is an essential part of the pastoral office of the Church.

- (i) *Intimation.* Before every administration of Baptism seven days' notice (save in exceptional circumstances) should be required of the parents or guardians to the Minister, in order to permit of interview and preparation.
- (ii) *Preparation.* As soon as possible after notice has been given, full enquiry should be made and all necessary instruction and exposition of the service given by the Minister, a Deaconess, or some other competent and instructed Leader. For this purpose the parents or guardians should be visited in their home, or they should be asked to attend at the Church or at a convenient hour. Instruction should be regarded as particularly necessary in the case of a first child, or of the first Baptism from the home according to the Methodist rite. If the parents or guardians cannot pledge themselves to give the promises contained in the Service of Baptism, the Minister may defer the Baptism of the child.

- (iii) *Administration.* Normally the Sacrament of Baptism should be administered in the Church and by an ordained Minister, preferably at a service of public worship. Baptism should take place at home only in the case of the child's prolonged or serious illness. Where administration by an ordained Minister is impracticable, the Sacrament may be administered by a Probationary Minister in pastoral charge, by an ordained Deaconess, by a Probationary Deaconess in pastoral charge, or by a Lay Pastor or a fully accredited Local Preacher, in consultation with the Superintendent or one of his colleagues other than in exceptional circumstances.

Members of the Church should always be present and take part in the service. The service should include the appropriate words of Our Lord, the substance of the promises contained in the service in the Book of Offices, and Baptism with water 'in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit'; the service in the Book of Offices should commonly be used. Every effort should be made to secure the presence of both parents or guardians at the service.

The Minister shall see that all necessary particulars are inserted in the Register of Baptism and that the parents receive a Certificate of Baptism.

- (iv) *After Baptism.* Since the parents or guardians and the Church together accept solemn obligations for the spiritual nurture of the child, the utmost care should be taken that these obligations are fulfilled. It is the duty of parents, guardians, and teachers to teach baptized children the meaning of their Baptism and so to lead them to personal faith. Personal faith leads on to reception into full membership of the Church and thus the process of incorporation into the Church, begun in Baptism, is completed.

A Roll of all baptized children should be kept in every church, and the child's enrolment should be signalled at an early date after Baptism by a suitable Service in the Sunday School. The Sunday School, as the nursery of the Church, naturally bears responsibility for the next stage of the child's relationship to the Church. But the co-operation of the senior members of the Church is needed. It is highly desirable that suitable members be enlisted who will undertake to visit at regular intervals the homes of children who are, or have been, on the Baptismal Roll, and to maintain a spiritual oversight; such 'sponsors' should report to the Minister, through the Roll Secretary, at least once a year.

Periodic meeting of parents whose children are on the Baptismal Roll, and even beyond that stage, conducted by some responsible person, are strongly recommended.

(Minutes 1952, pp. 225-230)

The Conference of 1964 drew attention to the last sentence in Section (1) of this statement, 'Therefore the Methodist Church . . .' See Agenda 1964, p.15.