

THE USE OF THE TERM 'CONFIRMATION' (1962)

The Report on Church Membership, adopted by the Conference of 1961, includes the statement that the following elements in the 'Service for the Public Reception of New Members' are of great importance:

- (a) Personal commitment to Christ as Lord and Saviour and expression of the desire to serve Him in His Church:
- (b) offering of prayer that the gifts and graces which Christ by the Holy Spirit has already given may be continued, confirmed and increased by the same Spirit:
- (c) welcome of the member by the Church upon his entry into those privileges and duties within the Church which are appropriate to those who have committed themselves to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, and which include the receiving of Holy Communion.

In a footnote to (b) above it is pointed out that the element of prayer that the gifts and graces bestowed by the Holy Spirit may be 'continued, confirmed and increased by the same Spirit' is not sufficiently prominent in the present Service, and that 'any revision of the Book of Offices should pay careful attention to this point, in the light of Methodist experience of inward religion, of personal awareness of Jesus Christ and of the work of the Holy Spirit in the believer'.

It is abundantly clear from this, and from the whole Methodist understanding of the faith and life of Christians, that no change in the name of the Service could be recommended which obscures the fundamental importance of personal commitment to Jesus Christ, personal knowledge of Him as Lord and Saviour, and the conversion which is brought about by the Holy Spirit in those who have committed themselves to Jesus Christ.

Confirmation, as practised in the Roman, Lutheran and Anglican Churches, has, properly understood, two dominant meanings: the confirmation by the candidate, by public confession of faith, of the membership entered upon by Baptism; and prayer that the Holy Spirit may confirm, strengthen and increase the gifts and graces which He has already given.

Thus there are resemblances between Confirmation as administered in the Anglican Communion, and the Methodist Service for the Public Reception of New Members. But there are also differences. The Methodist Service, for instance, does not include the laying on of hands by a bishop. Moreover, it places great stress on the element of personal commitment, but not so much on prayer for the operation of the Holy Spirit. It is evident that the two titles, 'The Public Reception of New Members' and 'Confirmation' are not simply interchangeable, but, when properly understood in the way suggested above, refer to different aspects of a complex whole.

If these considerations are carefully borne in mind, and the traditional Methodist witness to the necessity of the New Birth, which in every believer is the work of God's saving Grace, is thereby maintained, there is no objection to the use of 'Confirmation' as an alternative title for the 'Service of Public Reception'.

The present name, 'Service for the Public Reception of New Members', is not, however, wholly satisfactory in itself. For, according to Methodist doctrine, those who are baptized are received into 'the congregation of Christ's flock'; when at a later stage

they commit themselves consciously and personally to Jesus Christ and desire to have fellowship with Him in His Church, the membership which is theirs in Baptism is completed. The service in which they are received is properly called 'The Service for Public Reception into Full Membership'.

The full title should therefore be 'The Order of Service for Public Reception into Full Membership, or Confirmation', and in any revision of the Book of Offices this should be printed, with an explicit foreword as to its meaning.

The following should be the foreword, printed in italics at the head of the Order of Service:

In this Service those who desire to be saved from their sins through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and who evidence the same in their life and conduct, and desire to have fellowship with the Methodist people, having been baptized and having been approved by a Leaders' Meeting, are publicly received into full membership, with all its duties and privileges, of the Methodist Church, which is within the Holy Catholic Church. As they commit themselves to Jesus Christ their Lord and Saviour, prayer is made that the Holy Spirit may strengthen them by confirming the gifts which He has given.

(Agenda 1962, pp. 16-18)

In adopting this report, the Conference added the words, 'who alone makes them new creatures in Him', after the words 'Holy Spirit' in the last line but one.