

MINISTERS IN FULL CONNEXION AND BAPTISM (1975)

1. Conference of 1974 directed the Faith and Order Committee 'to consider whether only those ministers may be in full connexion with the Conference who are willing to baptize infants and to give a detailed report to the Ministerial Session of the 1975 Conference' (*Daily Record*, Ministerial Session, 25th June, 1974, p.2, No.11).

2. This topic was discussed by the Faith and Order Committee in 1972-3 when the Connexional Probationers' Oversight Committee requested advice on the case of a probationer minister who was unwilling to baptize infants. The advice given at that time was:

'Where the matter of Infant Baptism is an open one for a student or probationer, he should be helped in every possible way to understand and accept the Methodist position. If, however, he is not willing to baptize infants he should not be ordained into the ministry of our Church'.

3. We suggest that Conference try to decide on this matter in terms of discipline and pastoral practice, rather than by raising the whole question of the theology of (infant) baptism. We are encouraged in this position by the refusal of the 1974 Conference to initiate a general enquiry into the theology of our initiation practices. (*Daily Record*, Representative Session, 28th June, 1974, p.22, No.31, 5th July, 1974, p.60, No.23.)

4. To many the answer to this question is obvious, namely that Methodist ministers are and ought to be expected to baptize infants in situations where the stated requirements have been fulfilled. The fact that in the past men have resigned from our ministry over the issue of believers' rather than infants' baptism bears out this point.

5. Such an answer is not acceptable to all, however, and the fact that the Conference of 1974 raised the issue and remitted it for detailed examination indicates the desire that it should be considered again.

6. The evidence from our documents is as follows:

- (a) The Deed of Union, Clauses 30 and 33, indicates a firm doctrinal commitment to the Sacrament of Baptism (Clause 30, *CPD* p.62), but bases the practice of baptizing infants upon 'the Methodist usage' (Clause 33(c), *CPD* p.63). It is not entirely clear whether the less rigorous approach of 33(c) stemmed from the general assumption that the practice was widely accepted, or from an awareness that any stronger wording would have produced unresolvable division of opinion.
- (b) Statements, Memoranda and Reports from Conference during the past forty years (1936 Memorandum, 1952 Statement, 1961 Report on Church Membership) do not put the issue beyond doubt either way. They defend and adumbrate the practice of baptizing infants, and they exhort Christian parents to present their children for baptism. But it is not a condition of the parents' continuing in membership that they should do so.

- (c) The responses in the Ordination Service (p.G9) are relevant at this point. The third and fourth questions, concerning doctrine and discipline, might seem to be the most appropriate. The point they raise is whether baptism of *infants* is one of ‘the doctrines of the Christian faith as this Church has received them’, or whether – as ‘usage’ – it belongs to the question on accepting ‘the discipline of this Church’. Or is our usage in this matter part of the assumed general interpretation of the doctrine of Baptism? If so, is it properly a matter for discipline if a minister refuses to baptize according to our usage?

(One further comment here concerned the setting of the third and fourth questions in Ordination in relation to the second and fifth. What happens if a minister, in accepting and studying the Holy Scriptures as he promises to do in ordination, reaches the conclusion that his position on that basis must now be different from the accepted one in his denomination?)

- (d) Question (A) 2 of the Agenda for the Spring Meeting of Synod – Ministerial Session (CPD p.400), has the clarifying note that our doctrinal standards are to found in the Deed of Union, Clause 30 (i.e. Baptism but not *Infant* Baptism as in 33(c)). No definition of ‘our discipline’ is offered.
- (e) In connection with candidates for the ministry we noted that, prior to the Conference of 1974, SO. 700 *Qualifications*, Clause (2), included the sentence, ‘He shall also have read and approved an authorised statement on the polity of the Methodist Church’. It is not clear which ‘authorised statement’ this referred to, but presumably Clauses 30 and 33 of the Deed of Union would be included. In any case it seems reasonable to assume that every candidate knows that Methodist ministers are required to baptize infants.
- (f) The General Directions for the Baptism of Infants (*Entry into the Church* p.A2 ff), begin with the words, ‘A solemn obligation rests upon parents to present their children to Christ in Baptism . . .’ (9) and later (12) state that, ‘Normally the Sacrament of Baptism should be administered in the Church by an ordained minister’. It does not say that he should be the minister in pastoral charge of the Church concerned, but references to ‘the minister’ in 10, 11 and 15 would seem to reflect another aspect of our ‘usage’, namely that he would normally be the ‘local’ minister.
- (g) On the basis of the above evidence – the weight of our ‘usage’, the solemn obligation laid upon parents to present their children for baptism, the general setting which each of these provides for candidature, ordination and pastoral ministry – *there would seem to be a clear obligation upon the Methodist Church so to order its life that a minister is available to administer infant baptism when the stated requirements have been fulfilled*. In particular Deed of Union 33c, the Statement of 1952 and the General Directions for the Service of Infant Baptism seem to provide a *normative standard* rather than simply a *descriptive account*. *If that is the obligation of the Church then prima facie it is the duty of each individual minister to play his part in fulfilling it.*

7. In favour of a greater degree of flexibility than has previously been understood to be our practice one could advance the following reasons:

- (a) The documents establish a prima facie obligation upon ministers to baptize infants, but there are good grounds for seeing it as only prima facie.
- (b) If one takes the case of parents who are Methodist members, it is clear that while they are exhorted to present their children for baptism there is no suggestion that they should be disciplined for not doing so. This presumably applies equally to ministers as to laymen in their capacities as members and parents.
- (c) In the same way one might ask whether, in view of the comparative imprecision of Deed of Union 33c, a doctrinal or disciplinary charge could be sustained against a Methodist minister for declining to baptize infants. Can a minister be charged for refusing to do what is not *explicitly* stated to be his duty? And if the Church could not or would not dismiss a minister on these grounds, is it right for moral pressure to be exerted upon him to dismiss himself?
- (d) In a responsibly handled pastoral situation it would be perfectly possible for the minister to explain his position and for his people to understand – without necessarily agreeing with – his convictions. In such a situation alternative arrangements for infant baptism could be made. The overall result could well be a deepening of respect and of mutual pastoral care, as well as a greater awareness of the uncertainty which prevails at the theological level on this subject.
- (e) In any case Conference Statements reflect the view of Conference at a particular time. The present situation in Methodism contains a wide variety of outlook on this particular matter. Whether or not it would justify a change of position by the denomination, it does suggest the wisdom of allowing exceptions rather than excluding ministers who have reached and hold their positions thoughtfully, and who wish to remain Methodist ministers (see paragraph 6(g) above). This is particularly so if we see it as important, in determining our doctrine and practice, to bear in mind not only the evidence and traditions inherited from the past, but also the way in which the Christian church is moving towards an ultimate wholeness of belief and action, in this as in other matters.
- (f) The analogy of re-marriage of divorced persons is near enough to show that exceptions of this kind, where biblical evidence is ambivalent (as it is in both the re-marriage of divorced persons and baptism), are manageable in our system. (Standing Order 830, under which no minister is obliged to re-marry a divorced person contrary to his conscience.)
- (g) This would be particularly so if ministers who do not wish to baptize infants were to give assurance, as they should be required to do, that they will not stand in the way of parents wishing infant baptism for their children, but will make the necessary arrangements for them to receive it.
- (h) The social influences upon church practices must be remembered. Infant baptism is closely related to a ‘Christendom’ situation: ‘Believers’ baptism to a missionary situation. Since we are moving from the former to the latter it is not the moment for rigidity over infant baptism.

8. Over against this position, and indicating a line of action which does not allow exceptions, are the following considerations:

- (a) Our documents, while not explicitly requiring every Methodist minister to be willing to baptize infants, reflect the norm within the denomination, and this gives particular meaning to general doctrinal comments about baptism in our services, etc., including Ordination.
- (b) The candidate and student-in-training for the Methodist ministry knows what is expected of him in this matter, since baptizing infants is part of a Methodist minister's work according to our usage.
- (c) The statement of ministerial responsibilities set out in Standing Order 520:

The Superintendent and other minister or ministers appointed to the several Circuits is and are appointed by the Conference to preach and perform all acts of religious worship and Methodist discipline in each of the Methodist chapels and other preaching-places approved by the Conference already erected or to be erected in each Circuit respectively, within the space of twelve calendar months, at such time or times and in such manner as they find proper; subject, nevertheless, to the Superintendent minister and to the existing laws and regulations of the Conference.

which is printed as a preamble to the stations in each draft and in the *Minutes of Conference* as required by Standing Order 737(4), can hardly be construed as not including the baptism of infants.

- (d) The fact that Methodist parents are urged to present children for baptism, and that they present them in a church which receives pastoral care from one minister, makes it natural to expect that that minister will baptize the children so presented.
- (e) The role of the ordained man as – in a special way – the representative of the Church, raises questions about how a minister can fulfil such a role if he is out of agreement with his denomination on such a fundamental issue concerning our usage.
- (f) A better analogy than that of re-marriage of divorced persons (see 7 (f) above), would be that of a minister refusing to administer Holy Communion because of convictions like those held by some members of the Salvation Army or the Society of Friends.
- (g) Further to this there is the responsibility not only to perform the functions required of a minister, but also to advocate and teach the position held by his Church on matters such as Baptism.
- (h) There is the pastoral problem of the effect on a congregation of a minister's refusal to perform what the denomination exhorts them to seek; a situation which could seriously hinder the minister's general pastoral relations and effectiveness.
- (i) It could create problems of stationing by shifting an important boundary within which all ordained ministers have previously been understood to function.

- (j) Although it can be argued that in an ideal pastoral situation this problem could be handled, in fact there is more likely to be an awkward muddle since some action has to be taken.
- (k) So long as Methodism has a stance on this matter her ministers must stand by it. The force of the argument for exceptions really points towards a re-examination of our whole position.

9. Having made the detailed examination outlined above the Faith and Order Committee judges that our discipline and pastoral practice do not allow exceptions in the matter of Methodist ministers being willing to baptize infants.

(Agenda 1975, pp. 249-53.)

The Conference adopted the report and resolved to add the following to Standing Order 718:

- (7) Only those may be received into full connexion with the Conference who are willing to baptize infants in appropriate circumstances.

The Conference adopted a further report, *Infant Baptism and Ministerial Discipline*, in 1988 (see Volume 2, pp. 102-111).