

**BAPTISM, CONFIRMATION, AND CHURCH MEMBERSHIP
IN THE METHODIST CHURCH BEFORE THE UNION OF 1968
(PART II)**

OLE E. BORGEN

TWENTIETH-CENTURY METHODISM

BAPTISM

As already mentioned previously in Part I of this article the exact status of the baptized in relation to the church, was anything but clear. The *Discipline* of the Methodist Episcopal Church of 1856 included for the first time a section on "The Relation of Baptized Children to the Church," thus clarifying the matter.¹ The *Discipline* of the Methodist Episcopal Church of 1932, also has a similar section. Paragraph 52 reads in part: "We hold that all children, by virtue of the unconditional benefits of the atonement, are members of the Kingdom of God, and therefore graciously entitled to Baptism."² It proceeds with a statement about the need for Christian instruction, and the responsibility of the parents in this, and continues, "We regard all children who have been baptized as placed in visible covenant relation to God and as preparatory members under the special care and supervision of the Church."

"The Order for Baptism of Children" follows in the same vein, "Dearly Beloved, forasmuch as all children are members of the kingdom of God and therefore graciously entitled to Baptism,"—and the congregation is called upon to pray that God "will grant that this child, being baptized with water, may also be baptized with the Holy Spirit, and become a worthy member of Christ's holy Church."³ In his prayers the minister prays that the child may grow in grace, and that ". . . by the restraining and renewing influence of thy Holy Spirit he may ever be a true child of God. . . ." He then prays for the parents that God so guide and uphold

¹Paul S. Sanders, *An Appraisal of John Wesley's Sacramentalism in the Evolution of Early American Methodism* (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, New York: Union Theological Seminary, 1954), 419, n. 74. (Sanders)

²*Discipline*, 1932, par. 51, 52. (*Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church* and of *the Methodist Church*, as well as *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* will be indicated by the word *Discipline* and the year of publication).

³*Discipline*, 1932, par. 513, 505.

them, that “. . . they may lead him into that life of faith whose strength is righteousness and whose fruit is everlasting joy and peace.”⁴

Several comments are warranted in this connection. First, baptism no longer enters the infant into the Body of Christ: The child is baptized *because* he/she already belongs to the Kingdom of God. Paragraph 51, cited above, claims that this is “. . . by virtue of the unconditional benefits of the atonement . . .” — thus avoiding the claim that the basis for membership in the Kingdom is a *natural* capacity. The ritual for baptism does not mention the benefits in this connection. This statement of the grounds for membership in the Kingdom, is a modern attempt to restate the spiritual reality Wesley called “prevenient grace.” But in so doing two essential features of Wesley’s doctrine have disappeared: the doctrine of original sin, and his insistence that prevenient grace is supernaturally bestowed upon the child at birth, through the work of the Holy Spirit. Secondly, the picture becomes even more confusing when the same ritual in one place holds all children to be “members of the Kingdom,” and then lets the pastor pray that God will guide the parents to lead the child *into* the life of faith, in effect making faith dependent upon the person’s having reached the age of discretion, and his/her being conscious thereof constitutive of this faith. Thus the emphasis is placed upon the human, not on the work of the Holy Spirit. Thirdly, paragraph 52, holds that children are regarded “as preparatory members under the special care and supervision of the Church.” It does not say that they enter into this preparatory membership by being baptized. It seems to be more a practical matter of record keeping, an interpretation which is supported by the fact that “Baptized Children shall not be counted as ‘Preparatory Members’ in making reports of membership.”⁵ Lastly, the *Discipline* makes excellent provisions for the instruction of the children.

The first *Discipline* of The Methodist Church, resulting from the union of 1939, also has a section entitled “Baptized Children and the Church” (Paragraphs 139-143). The children are still seen as members of the Kingdom by virtue of the benefits of the Atonement. But the rest of that paragraph has been radically changed. Where the 1932 *Discipline* holds that parents should be exhorted to bringing the baptized child up in the Christian faith, the 1939 edition brings in a new element: “The Minister shall earnestly exhort all parents to dedicate their children to the Lord in Baptism as early as convenient, and, before Baptism is administered, shall diligently instruct the parents regarding the vows which they assume in this Sacrament.”⁶ Here the parents, their act of dedicating their child to God, and the vows they thereby assume, come into the foreground.

⁴*Discipline*, 1932, par. 513, 507.

⁵*Discipline*, 1932, par. 94.8, 89.

⁶*Discipline*, 1939, par. 139, 55.

Baptism is dedication. The parents and the minister are the only active agents in the rite, God is not allowed to do anything. Secondly, the baptized children are still regarded as being in visible covenant relation to God, and they are also considered Preparatory Members. But, with the addition “. . . and they shall be so reported,” the inconsistency of the *Discipline* of 1932, mentioned above, is removed. Nevertheless, in spite of saying, “We regard all children who have been baptized . . . as Preparatory Members. . . ,” it seems clear that they do not become such members by being baptized. It rather appears to be a matter of rollkeeping, since unbaptized children may have the same privilege, as shown by this new addition: “Such unbaptized children may, with the consent of their parents or guardians, be recognized and recorded as Preparatory members.”⁷

The Ritual for the Baptism of Infants, also adopted in 1939, begins with a charge to the congregation which shows a definite tendency toward universalism: “Dearly Beloved, forasmuch as all men are heirs of life eternal and subjects of the saving grace of the Holy Spirit; and that our Saviour Christ saith, Suffer the little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of God. . . .”⁸ Here not only are “all children members of the kingdom of God, “but” *all men are heirs* of life eternal. That is, Christ’s efficacious procurement of salvation is tacitly also made to include the application or personal appropriation of this, thus implicitly advocating a doctrine of man as “being inherently good.” The minister prays for the child that, by the help of the Holy Spirit, she/he “. . . may be steadfast in faith, joyful through hope and rooted in love. . . .”⁹ Still, the prayer that the parents may “*lead him into* the life of faith,” is retained. The actual presentation of the child by the parents, and their consecrating him in baptism, together with the parents’ vows, stand as the central and essential parts of the rite. As far as the child is concerned, whatever is mentioned above his spiritual state, is either said to be already present, or to be fulfilled in the future. There is no mention of admission into the church or into the covenant as being effectuated in baptism, and the question of regeneration or the new birth is not even touched upon.

The Ritual of Baptism of 1939 remains unchanged up to and including the 1960 General Conference. The statement of the 1939 *Discipline*: “We regard all children who have been baptized as being in visible covenant relation to God and as Preparatory Members, under the special care and supervision of the Church . . .”¹⁰ is omitted in the *Discipline* of 1948, which

⁷*Discipline*, 1939, par. 140, 56.

⁸*Discipline*, 1939, par. 1580, 541.

⁹*Discipline*, 1939, par. 1580, 5. 542.

¹⁰*Discipline*, 1939, par. 140, 55.

simply reads, "We regard all children who have been baptized as being under the special care and supervision of the Church."¹¹ From 1952 on, even this is omitted, there is only one requirement, namely, that the names of baptized children shall be kept on the preparatory membership roll.¹²

The theological rationale for baptizing infants, referring to the benefits of the Atonement and the children's being members of the kingdom of God, is continued until 1960, at which time even that must give way: "Because the redeeming love of God, revealed in Jesus Christ, extends to all persons, and because Jesus explicitly included the children in his Kingdom,"—then follows, not a statement that the children ". . . are therefore graciously entitled to Baptism,"—but a charge to the pastor that he ". . . shall earnestly exhort all Christian parents or guardians to present their children to the Lord in Baptism." No longer is the Atonement of Christ the basis, but rather a general idea of "the redeeming love of God, revealed in Jesus Christ." The tacit assumption is that the fact of God's redeeming love, also implies that all persons, presumably, *are* actually redeemed. This stance may be explained in terms of "prevenient grace," but even that explanation will not stand, since by its very nature, prevenient grace is *applied* grace, through the work of the Holy Spirit. The fact of God's redeeming love does not automatically carry with it the consequence that all persons *are* in a living relationship with God.

This wholly non-Wesleyan concept of baptism which Methodism has developed during the last thirty years, is reflected in much of the recent Methodist literature on the matter, but also in the attitudes of the people toward baptism. Only some examples can be given here. First, "Children, we believe, are born in innocency, not guilty of inherited sins; they are possessed of a capacity which at the opening of accountability enables them to enter upon the way of salvation or upon the way of sin. . . ."¹³ Secondly, baptism ". . . can work no immediate good in the heart of that little one. . . . We assume that moral character cannot be either created or bestowed by ceremony."¹⁴ Clinton Cherry asserts that the grace of baptism is God's forgiveness *of our repentance* of sin. But infants cannot repent, and the grace of forgiveness is experienced first when the child consciously accepts the love of God and becomes a Christian, which again should result in his joining the church. Only when that stage is reached, is baptism complete. He then presents the following propositions, which exhibit a theological naiveté not foreign to modern Methodism: "No in-

¹¹*Discipline*, 1948, par. 120, 39.

¹²*Discipline*, 1952, par. 128, 44.

¹³Robert S. Goodloe, *The Sacraments in Methodism* (Nashville: The Methodist Publishing House, 1953), 117, 124; (Goodloe) cf. Clinton M. Cherry, *The Beliefs of a Methodist Christian* (Nashville: Methodist Evangelistic Materials, 1953), 67. (Cherry).

¹⁴Goodloe, 122.

fant Baptism is valid which does not issue in adherence to the Kingdom through the Church." And again, "No Baptism is valid . . . unless there is repentance, forgiveness, and a new life in God for the believer."¹⁵ Cherry here clearly confuses efficacy and validity: *every* baptism performed with water in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit is *valid*. Efficacy, on the other hand, is wholly in the hands of God. It is He who forgives; He who gives new life; He who sustains the growth of that life. Wesley taught that any means of grace was efficacious when *used by God*, and grace was actually given, which again would show itself in the fruits. Thirdly, baptism of an infant does not admit that child into the membership of the Methodist church. Cherry claims that Methodism ". . . baptizes them in anticipation of their joining the church."¹⁶ Lastly, neither are children baptized on the ground that they are now under the covenant.¹⁷ In fact, water baptism for that part of Methodism which Goodloe and Cherry represent, has in practice lost all of its essential content, and it is doubtful whether it can rightly be called a sacrament any more. In the minds of many Methodists baptism has only social significance: It is a "beautiful" name-giving ceremony. For Cherry baptism is basically a spiritual experience, which does not really need any outward ceremony: "Why then do not Methodists omit the ceremony as do the Quakers? Methodists, like Baptists, have regard for tradition and they preserve baptism as an ordinance of Christ and find it a beautiful act which those who understand it will not want to omit. For life is made gracious and lovely by its symbolic acts: our manners, the tokens of our friendship, the pledges of our patriotism, the expressions of our love."¹⁸ That is, baptism is retained only because it has historical, sentimental and esthetic value. The *Proposed Revisions for the Book of Worship*, which later issued in the *Book of Worship* of 1964, clearly takes a different stand and defines the difference between a sacrament and dedication: "In dedication we make a gift of life to God for him to accept; in a Sacrament God offers the gift of his unfailing grace for us to accept."¹⁹ To this position a pastor takes exception in an article in *Christian Advocate*, and concludes, "The 'revised' style Baptism will largely eliminate any necessity for a salvation experience. It will all be taken care of before a child is able to say 'yea' or 'nay.' I definitely believe our Baptism ritual emphasizes dedica-

¹⁵Cherry, 67-68.

¹⁶Goodloe, 155, Cherry, 67.

¹⁷Goodloe, 124.

¹⁸Cherry, 68.

¹⁹*Proposed Revisions of the Book of Worship* (Nashville: The Methodist Publishing House, 1960), 19. (*Proposed Revisions*).

²⁰H. R. Thompson, "Infant Baptism: Dedication," *Christian Advocate* (vol. VI, No. 11, May 24, 1962), 11-12. Ole E. Borgen, *John Wesley on the Sacraments. A Theological Study*. (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press, [1968]. Reprint.), 139. (Borgen).

tion, for that is what infant Baptism is all about.”²⁰ However, in the same issue, another writer claims that baptism is “entry into covenant.”²¹ Another, and much richer and fuller view of baptism is advocated in a little book published by the same Methodist agency which published Cherry’s book, and which asserts,

The Methodist teaching and practice on Christian baptism is clearly stated by bishop John M. Moore in *Methodism in Belief and Action*. It is a covenant; it is a commitment to Christ and His Kingdom; it is a rite of initiation into that body of which Christ is the head; it is the symbol of purification; it is the emblem of the baptism by the Spirit of God. . . . It is the sign and seal of a new spiritual birth.²²

The section “The Children and the Church” of the *Discipline* of 1960, discussed above, remained basically unchanged in the 1964 edition, as in that of 1968.²³ The latest *Book of Worship*, finally approved by the General Conference of 1964, includes an entirely new ritual for baptism. It appears to be a deliberate attempt to reclaim for baptism in the Methodist Church a real sacramental status. The opening address to the congregation reads, in part:

Dearly Beloved, Baptism is an outward and visible sign of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, through which grace we become partakers of his righteousness and heirs of life eternal. Those receiving this Sacrament are thereby marked as Christian disciples, and initiated into the fellowship of Christ’s holy Church.²⁴

Here baptism is defined as “an outward and visible sign of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.” The idea of baptism as being merely dedication by the parents is again omitted. It is said that we *become* partakers of Christ’s righteousness and heirs of life eternal *through God’s grace*, a marked change from the ritual of 1960 which says: “. . . forasmuch as all men *are heirs* of life eternal.”²⁵ However, nothing is said about the means through which this grace is conveyed, nor about baptism as such a means. Two things happen to the baptized: 1. the person is marked as a Christian disciple; and 2. she/he is initiated into the fellowship of Christ’s

²¹F. E. Stoeffler, “Infant Baptism: Entry Into Covenant.” *Christian Advocate* (vol. VI, No. 11, May 24, 1962), 10-11; cf. Borgen, 1939.

²²C. C. Selecman, *The Methodist Primer* (Nashville: Methodist Evangelical Materials, n.d., 19th printing), 38. cf. Henry Wheeler, *History and Exposition of the Twenty-five Articles of Religion of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: The Methodist Book Concern, 1924. Reprint.), 307. (Wheeler).

²³The *Discipline* of 1968 introduces one new aspect in this section, namely, the idea of Confirmation. This will be further discussed below. Furthermore, this *Discipline*, for the first time, does not have a section on “The General Services of the Church.” *The Book of Worship for Church and Home* (Nashville: The Methodist Publishing House, 1964), is, therefore, a valid expression of the ritual of the United Methodist Church even after the unification of 1968. (*Book of Worship*).

²⁴*Discipline*, 1964, par. 1713, 558, *Book of Worship*, p. 7.

²⁵*Discipline*, 1960, par. 1910, 539.

holy Church. What is meant by the ambiguous phrase “the fellowship of Christ’s holy Church” is not said. Does it mean the universal or the particular church; the visible or the invisible church — or perhaps all of these? In a small publication on baptism, sponsored by the Commission on Worship of the United Methodist Church, David Randolph speaks of baptism as “. . . a child’s entrance into the family of God, to church,” and that “. . . the person is baptized into Christ’s whole church and not merely a local congregation.” And again, “When the child is baptized he becomes a member of the church of Jesus Christ.”²⁶ This, however, does not really mean that the child becomes a member of the church. That takes place first at confirmation. But Randolph goes further than the Order of Baptism, at least explicitly, does: “Baptism is the sacrament by means of which the grace of God makes us partake of his righteousness and inheritors of everlasting life.” And, “The Baptism which Jesus initiated is a means by which the Holy spirit is communicated.”²⁷ Nevertheless, in the section entitled “Theological Considerations” Randolph rather speaks of baptism as witness and profession: It *tells* us about God; it *shows* God’s love; we *acknowledge* the God who loves us; it *tells* us about man; the baptized child is given a *title* and a *name* in the kingdom of God.²⁸ “Original sin” is defined in terms of what is usually considered the fruit or consequences of this inherent corruption: nothingness, anonymity, alienation, — and these, he allows, “. . . are washed away in baptism.” Turning against the dedication emphasis in the earlier formulation, he claims that baptism is more than dedication “. . . inasmuch as a real transaction between God and the child is acknowledged.”²⁹ As a whole, Randolph’s little booklet is a masterpiece in theological double-talk: “one comes to life in the family of God,” can mean “new birth” or “regeneration.” But it can also mean that this life is already there, but latent, and then comes to life. Baptism is the “event” in which this happens, but the concept of “event” is made to be almost all-inclusive in terms of time and content. “The grace of God” is the active agent using baptism as a means, not God or the Holy Spirit. As a matter of fact, God or the Holy Spirit is never mentioned as being active in this sacrament at all. Baptism is “more than dedication,” because “a real transaction between God and the child is acknowledged.” One may ask, How? How is this acknowledged and by whom? What is the content of that transaction? How is God active in this? In short, it appears that he is trying to please by leaving enough ambiguities to allow for a more traditional interpretation or more liberal, “modern” one, as the reader may wish.

²⁶David J. Randolph, *Baptism, Historical, Theological and Practical Considerations* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1968), 5, 8. (Randolph).

²⁷Randolph, 5.

²⁸Randolph, 7.

²⁹Randolph, 7-8.

Thus, in spite of a richer and fuller concept of baptism, the latest "Order for the Administration of the Sacrament of Baptism" leaves out several important aspects. Regeneration and justification are out of the picture. The child is initiated into the family of God, but nothing is said about a covenant with God, or being made a member of Christ. In spite of Randolph's statement to the opposite effect, nowhere in this ritual is there said anything about the Holy Spirit being given in baptism. Randolph, furthermore, claims that baptism functions as a means of grace; the Ritual does not make such a claim. The Ritual for Confirmation, however, speaks of profession ". . . the faith into which *they were* baptized," which seems to include more than the Ritual for Baptism does. Neither does the baptizand become a preparatory member through baptism, because "dedicated" children have the same privilege.³⁰

MEMBERSHIP

The 1932 *Discipline* of the Methodist Episcopal Church operates with a two-fold concept of membership, in order that ". . . the Church be properly safeguarded against the hasty admission of any unworthy person."³¹ First, preparatory membership into which all persons expressing a desire to lead a godly life, may be received for the purpose of giving time and opportunity for instruction ". . . in the principles of the Christian life as well as in the rules and regulations of the Methodist Episcopal Church. They shall have all privileges of the church, except being members of the Quarterly Conference or take part in judicial processes except as witnesses."³² The special and optional "Order for Receiving Persons as Preparatory Members" gives a further reason for such membership: ". . . and also give proof both to themselves and to the Church, of the sincerity and depth of their convictions and of the strength of their purpose to lead a new life." Then the candidate answers questions whether there is an earnest desire to be saved from sin, to lead a holy life, to attend worship and to read the Word. The person is received with the hope that she/he will go forward to *complete* membership.³³ Baptized infants are also recorded as Preparatory Members.³⁴

Nevertheless, the membership rite is entitled "The Order for *Receiving* Persons *Into* the Church," although they already are "received into preparatory membership" with its rather extensive membership privileges. The prerequisites of membership are baptism, to know the nature of the privileges and duties of membership, and to have had instruction in the

³⁰*Discipline*, 1968, par. 131, 2, 77.

³¹*Discipline*, 1932, par. 50.1, 51.

³²*Discipline*, 1932, par. 50.2, 51.

³³*Discipline*, 1932, par. 516, 514-516.

³⁴*Discipline*, 1932, par. 52-53, 55.

teaching and aims of the church. In his charge to the candidates the minister speaks of “their seeking union with the Church of God,” and being “fully admitted.” The questions involved renewal of vows, confession of faith and declaration of purpose. The pastor then welcomes those whom “. . . we this day have received as members of our Church” and “to the fellowship of the Church.” But there is first a ceremony of the laying on of hands, during which the minister says: “The Lord defend thee with his heavenly grace and by his Spirit confirm thee in the faith and fellowship of all true disciples of Jesus Christ.”³⁵

The first *Discipline* of The Methodist Church (1939) begins the section for “admission into the Church” with these words: “All persons seeking to be saved from their sins and desiring to live the Christian life are eligible for membership in the Methodist Church.”³⁶ In 1952 another small, but important sentence was added, namely, that the pastor shall “. . . lead them to commit themselves to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.” This formulation of 1952 remains largely unchanged through the *Discipline* of 1964. As for Ritual for Receiving Members, the 1939 *Discipline* drops “The Order for Receiving Persons as Preparatory Members” which was optional. By 1944 this order had returned, and subsequently retained until 1964. The fact that not only baptized children, but adults seeking membership, as well as unbaptized children enrolled in classes of instruction, are listed as “Preparatory Members,” clearly shows that baptism is not at all considered the gate of entrance in this Preparatory Membership. However, beginning with the *Discipline* of 1952 *only* baptized children were put on the Preparatory Membership roll, while others were referred to the Constituency Roll—this in spite of the fact that the Order of Reception of Preparatory Members is still maintained!³⁷

“The Order for Receiving Members Into the Church” of 1939 remains the same up to 1964, when a radical change was effectuated, and it becomes “The Order for Confirmation and Reception into the Church.” Any discussion of this will naturally belong in the next section on Confirmation.

In summary, baptism does not admit into the church, whether in terms of Preparatory Membership or Full Membership. A person becomes a member only after instruction and commitment to Christ. Baptism is a prerequisite. In a sense, the membership rite has taken the place of confirmation in Methodism, but not quite, since the meaning baptism as practiced and understood by The Methodist Church before 1964, does not really allow for a real confirmation rite.

³⁵*Discipline*, 1932, par. 517, 516-519.

³⁶*Discipline*, 1939, par. 131, 53. This formulation remains unchanged until 1952, when a new formulation, with about the same content, is introduced. This again remains through the *Discipline* of 1964.

³⁷*Discipline*, 1952, par. 128, 132, 44, 46; cf. par. 1913, 527.

CONFIRMATION

In 1908 Wheeler writes, "The Methodist Episcopal Church has no rite of confirmation with the imposition of hands, but it has something analogous to it; that is, the reception of probationers into full membership. . . ." ³⁸ Nevertheless, the imposition of hands by the minister was soon added to the order for membership, even before the union of 1939. In 1955 Bishop Nolan Harmon could write,

We do not believe that in order to join the Church, one must be confirmed by the laying on of hands of a bishop, though we respect confirmation. We receive persons into the church through our pastors, and while our Reception of Members is a close replica of the Office of Confirmation in the Protestant Episcopal Church, there are profound differences between the underlying philosophies manifest in these separate rites. ³⁹

The Commission on Worship issued their *Proposed Revisions for the Book of Worship for Church and Home* for trial use, as approved by the General Conference of 1960. In giving their reasons for changing the order for reception of members into the church, they put forth several points: 1. Methodism is no longer a society, but a church; 2. the adoption of the title "The Order of Confirmation and Reception into the Church" . . . restores the Sacrament of Baptism to its traditional meaning as a sign and seal of inclusion in Christ's holy Church" (note: not The Methodist Church); 3. in confirmation the person confirms the vows taken at his baptism, and accepts the privileges and assumes the responsibilities of church membership; 4. this is consistent with the New Testament teaching and 5. with the essential elements taught in the church universal; 6. it meets the criticism that the Methodist ritual for receiving members into the church is parochial, and not in keeping with the practice of the ecumenical church; 7. it avoids the confusion brought on by the multiplicity of orders for receiving members. ⁴⁰

In the Order of Confirmation, etc., approved by the 1964 General Conference, quite a few changes were made, but the basic underlying principles of the *Proposed Revisions* were followed. The rubric speaks of "All who are to be confirmed as members of Christ's holy Church. . . ." (note: not received into membership of The Methodist Church). They shall have been baptized, and ". . . instructed in the doctrines and duties of the Christian faith" (note: not the doctrines and discipline of The Methodist Church). Neither is anything mentioned about any previous conversion or personal commitment to Christ. Rather, those who are to be confirmed

³⁸Wheeler, 286.

³⁹Nolan B. Harmon, *Understanding the Methodist Church* (Nashville: The Methodist Publishing House, 1955), 175.

⁴⁰*Proposed Revisions*, 26-27; cf. M. Lawrence Snow, "Confirmation and the Methodist Church." *The Versicle* (vol. XIII, No. 4, 1963. Reprint.), 3. (Snow).

“. . . are now ready to profess publicly the faith into which they were baptized.”⁴¹ The taking of the vows involves renewal of the baptismal vows; profession of Christ as Lord and Savior; profession of the faith of the Old and New Testament; concluding with a promise to live a Christian life by God’s grace, and be a faithful member of Christ’s holy church.⁴² Then follows the laying on of hands by the minister, who lays his hands upon each person severally, with this invocation, the candidates kneeling: “N., the Lord defend you in the faith and fellowship of all true disciples of Jesus Christ, Amen.”⁴³ *This* is the point of confirmation, since the following rubric reads, “Those confirmed shall rise, . . .” while the rubric before the laying on of hands says, “Then the candidates shall kneel. . . .” Furthermore, the candidates “. . . are to be confirmed. . . .” They are not themselves to be confirming anything, although they renew their baptismal vows and profess their faith. Thus, the underlying assumption is that either (1) the minister confirms their faith (which is a possible, but unlikely interpretation) or (2) the Holy Spirit is assumed to confirm their faith at the time of the invocation and the laying on of hands. That is, in some sense, the bestowal of the Holy Spirit or the assurance of the spirit is assumed to take place at that moment. Here one serious inconsistency between the underlying theology and the practice of this Order for Confirmation comes to light: The Wesleyan doctrine of assurance holds that it is God’s Spirit which agrees with my spirit that I am in a state of grace now. And, this is an *immediate* assurance, independent of any rite or action, and which assurance is actual, not formal. Furthermore, the Methodist conception of the ministry would exclude any power of the minister to bestow the Spirit. All the minister can do is to pray that the Spirit may be given, when God so wills. And, lastly, neither the laying on of hands nor the confirmation rite as such can be considered a sacrament or a means of grace.

After the vows and laying on of hands, those confirmed and members of “other communions in Christ’s holy Church” are admitted into membership of The Methodist Church, pledging to uphold it by presence, prayers, gifts and service. They are *this day* received into membership of *this congregation* of The Methodist Church. But they are *recognized* as members of Christ’s holy Church. Consequently, they were baptized into Christ’s holy Church, a membership the person to be confirmed now takes upon himself in renewing the baptismal vow. One may say that this is a matter of faith, while membership in a local congregation of The Methodist Church is a matter of church order. But, even this confirmation rite, although solving the problem of the relationship of confirmation and “be-

⁴¹*Discipline*, 1964, par. 1714, 526-563. The italics are mine.

⁴²*Ibid.*

⁴³*Ibid.*

ing receiving into the church," has, nevertheless, not solved the problem of the interrelationships of baptism, Preparatory Membership and membership in the Methodist Church, nor the relation of all of these to the necessity for new birth and conversion. As for confirmation as a prerequisite for partaking of the Lord's Supper, it is not necessary, at least not in principle. But in many places the practice among Methodists is to admit young persons to Communion only after confirmation or the equivalent rite, although this fencing of the table is contrary to the invitation extended to all who intended to lead a holy life.⁴⁴

CONTINENTAL EUROPEAN METHODISM

BAPTISM

A. Sulzberger's old Methodist dogmatics gives this definition of baptism: "Holy Baptism is an action ordained by Christ, through which we are receiving into the visible Church of Christ; it is, consequently, the sign of the new Covenant and seal and pledge of the promised grace."⁴⁵ Thus, through baptism a person is received into the visible church of Christ; whether seen as the universal or particular church, probably both are included. It is a sign of the covenant and an authenticating stamp and pledge of God's grace. Sulzberger, however, would not allow baptism to be the means through which this grace is conveyed nor that there is regenerating power connected with baptism.⁴⁶

Some of the same attitudes are found in later German-speaking Methodism. Dr. Theophil Spörri defines the sacraments as ". . . holy actions, through which he [Jesus Christ] has made his word of grace visible and personally award [or present to] each individual the salvation of the new Covenant,"⁴⁷ which is quite similar to Sulzberger's definition given above. He accepts for baptism of infants the same basis as that of the *Discipline* of 1932: "We hold that all children, by virtue of the unconditional benefits of the atonement, are members of the Kingdom of God, and therefore graciously entitled to Baptism."⁴⁸ The Atonement is the

⁴⁴*Discipline*, 1964, 563-564; cf. the Communion rubric, "All people who intend to lead a Christian life are invited to receive this holy Sacrament." par. 1715, p. 565; Snow, 4 ff.

⁴⁵A. Sulzberger, *Den kristna trosläran från Metodistisk ståndpunkt* (2 vols. Translated from German. Stockholm: Metodist-Episkopalkyrkans Förlag, 1888), II, 276. The translation into English is by me. (Sulzberger).

⁴⁶Sulzberger, II, 290.

⁴⁷Theophil Spörri, *Leitfaden für den Katekismus-Unterricht* (Zürich: Christliche Vereinsbuchhandlung, 1930), 65 (Q. 137): ". . . heilige Handlungen, durch welche er sein Gnadenwort schaulich und eindrucklich gemacht hat und das Heil des Neuen Bundes jedem einzelnen persönlich zuspricht." (Spörri, *Leitfaden*).

⁴⁸*Discipline*, 132, par. 51, 52. Theophil Spörri, *Was bedeutet uns die Christliche Taufe?* (Zürich: Christliche Vereinsbuchhandlung, 1950), 41. (Spörri, *Christliche Taufe*); cf. Spörri, *Leitfaden*, 66. (Q. 140).

foundation for the new life in God's Kingdom. Baptism, therefore, should remind us of the cleansing from sin which is given to us through the death of Christ. "My Baptism certifies [or, bears witness] that God from early childhood also has taken me into his Covenant of grace, offered me his precious salvation, and will look upon me as his child and heir of the Kingdom of heaven, for Jesus Christ's sake."⁴⁹ That is, for Christ's sake children are included in the covenant. Spörri, however, will not allow baptism the function of a real means of grace. It is a sign of the new birth, but is not seen as a means through which the Holy Spirit conveys this grace. A guide published to aid the ministers in teaching Spörri's catechism, is rather specific: Baptism is 1) an offer of God's covenant of grace with persons. Consequently, baptism is of no value if this offer is not received. In being baptized our names are linked with that of the Trinity, and we, as it were, become children of God by adoption. 2) Baptism is a confession of Christ; and 3) it is a sign or symbol (*Sinnbild*) of cleansing from sin being "buried and raised with Christ," and of the new birth through the Holy Spirit.⁵⁰ Thus the covenant idea seems to dominate. Neither the work of the Holy Spirit through this means of grace, nor the idea of baptism as initiation into membership in the church (whether seen as the universal or particular church) is mentioned. Spörri holds that baptized children of believing parents grow up within the circle of the Christian church. They belong to the Church of Christ, and are called in the Methodist church "Children of the Church" (*Kirchenkinder*), and, as such, are the special responsibility of the church.⁵¹ But nowhere is baptism seen as the means through which this is initiated. "Prevenient grace," by implication, suffices for the salvation of the baptized infant, thus giving to it a role and status, which in the church actually is to be given the grace of justification and the new birth.⁵² Nevertheless, in conclusion Spörri still maintains that the Lord is present but certainly not in the baptismal water, but in Spirit, and makes baptism really a sign of the covenant of peace and grace. There issues somehow a gracious after-effect, but Spörri will not really tie this to baptism as such. Part of his problem, it appears, is the fact that he sees baptism rather narrowly as an act of the pouring of water, rather than as a unity of actions by God, the minister and the parents, in which all of these are active each in his own way and on his own level.

Another approach to these problems is found in a more recent booklet by Dr. Rolf Knierim.⁵³ He finds Spörri's idea of the church as "communi-

⁴⁹Spörri, *Leitfaden*, 66 (Q. 141). My translation.

⁵⁰*Ich weiss an wen ich glaube* (Zürich: Verlag Christliche Vereinsbuchhandlung, 1957), Lektion 56 (Q. 138 through 143).

⁵¹Spörri, *Christliche Taufe*, 43.

⁵²Spörri, *Christliche Taufe*, 45.

⁵³Rolf Knierim, *Entwurf eines methodistischen Selbstverständnisses* (Zürich: Christliche Vereinsbuchhandlung, 1960). (Knierim).

ty" (*Gemeinschaft*) inadequate. As for the problems of baptism and membership, he begins by asking where in the outward form the church the "Gift of Salvation" and the "Acceptance of Salvation" are made visible. His answer is, baptism and the "Reception into Full Connection"—which are *one* event (*Geschehen*). Consequently, 1) A person becomes a member of the church through baptism. But, 2) this membership must be confirmed or acknowledged through the receiving of the gift of salvation and the confession of faith. If this membership is not acknowledged it means that it is spurned. A person is, then, a member of the church in a two-fold sense: in terms of the gift, and in terms of the acceptance.⁵⁴

Scandinavian Methodism does not really differ much from the German-speaking church in their view of baptism. On the basis of the Atonement, the children are members of the Kingdom of God and thereby entitled to baptism. The Norwegian *Discipline* is basically the same as the 1960 *Discipline*, while the Swedish *Discipline* is based on the 1964 edition. Both of these include baptized children in "Preparatory membership," but nobody else.⁵⁵ The official catechism of the Methodist Church in Norway also puts the emphasis upon the grace of the Atonement. Baptism ". . . is a visible message that we are surrounded by God's grace even before we were born, that he offers us his salvation and, for Christ's sake, received us as his children, and puts us in a visible covenant relationship with God and his Church."⁵⁶ All children are members of the Kingdom of God through the unconditional benefits issuing from the Atonement, and are therefore entitled to baptism. Children are not baptized in order that they may become the children of God, but because of the justification of all men through the Atonement. The Kingdom of God belongs to the children. "Do they have the grace, shall they also have the sign."⁵⁷

The rituals for baptism differ somewhat in Norwegian and Swedish Methodism. In the Norwegian version of the charge to the parent emphasizes dedication and the vows of the parents to bring the child up in the Christian faith, and lead the child into the love of God and the service of Jesus Christ. After baptism with water, the pastor prays that God may give the child an "enlightened mind and a holy heart," and protect him/her by his grace, and that the parents may be guided by the Holy Spirit in

⁵⁴Knierim, 26-27.

⁵⁵*Laere og Kirkeordning for Metodistkirken* (Oslo: Norsk Forlagsselskap, 1965), par. 114, 48-50. (Norwegian *Discipline*). *Metodistkyrkans Lära och Kyrkoordning* (Stockholm: Nya Bokförlags Aktiebolaget, 1966), par. 114, 52-54. (Swedish *Discipline*). cf. G. Henriksson and Göte Bergsten, *Var tro* (Stockholm: Ny Bokförlags Aktiebolaget, 1939), 49-50. (*Var tro*) Göte Bergsten, *Försoningsnåden i dopet* (Stockholm: Nya Bokförlags Aktiebolaget, 1932), 10 ff., 14. Theodor Arvidson, *Metodistkyrkan* (Stockholm: Nya Bokförlags Aktiebolaget, 1949), 18ff. Odd Hagen, *Den Kristne Dap. Herrens Hellige Nattverd* (Oslo: Metodistkirkens Ungdomsforbund, n.d.), 8-11.

⁵⁶*Var Tro*, (Q. 104), 45. My translation.

⁵⁷*Var Tro*, (Q. 107), 46. My translation.

this great task. The basic presupposition for baptism is that the child belongs to God and therefore should be baptized. God is not really seen as giving his grace in this sacrament. Nevertheless, a certain ambiguity is evident, in that the congregation is asked to pray to “. . . God the Father through Jesus Christ our Lord, that he, when we baptize them with water, will let them be baptized with the Holy Spirit, received into Christ's holy Church and become live members of it.”⁵⁸ The basic views are the same in Swedish Methodism, but it is somewhat more specific. Its ritual gives this definition of the sacrament: “Baptism is an outward and visible sign of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which we become partakers of his righteousness and heirs of life eternal.”⁵⁹ The children, on the basis of prevenient grace, belong to God's Kingdom. Then follows the same prayer as in the Norwegian ritual, that the child may be baptized with the Holy Spirit as it is baptized with water. Nevertheless, the emphasis is still on dedication and the responsibility of the parents.

Thus, we find some of the same problems in Scandinavian Methodism which we already discussed above.⁶⁰ We may seriously question whether baptism really has sacramental status in our church any more. Nothing really happens to the child in this sacrament, and God is not allowed to act through it. Only the parents are seen as giving something, namely, their child for dedication.⁶¹ This situation is rather unfortunate, and demands a rethinking in order that baptism again may be seen as a means of grace, and, consequently, be restored to a full sacramental status.

MEMBERSHIP

As can be gathered from what has been mentioned above, the Methodist Church is a free church and a professing church which also means voluntary membership through a public profession of Jesus Christ and the Holy Scriptures.⁶² While Spörri only gives one condition for membership, namely, the Wesleyan condition for admission into a Methodist society: A wish to be saved and free from his sins,⁶³ the new *Verfassung und Ordnung der Evangelisch-methodistischen Kirche* is more

⁵⁸*Ritual for Kirkelige Handlinger* (Oslo: Norsk Forlagsselskap A/S, 1968), pp. 19 ff. (*Ritual*, Norway).

⁵⁹*Kyrkohandbok för Metodistkyrkan i Sverige* (Stockholm: Nya Bokförlags Aktiebolaget, 1968), 25. (*Kyrkohandbok*, Sweden).

⁶⁰See article I, *Methodist History*, vol. 27 no. 2, pp. 107-108.

⁶¹See Thorvald Källstad, “Metodistkyrkan och Dopet.” (in *En bok om dopet*, Torsten Bergsten, ed., 91-112. Stockholm: Diakonistyrelsens Bokförlag, 1965), 103 ff., where he points out this weakening of the Sacrament in Methodism. He seems to feel that the Ritual for Baptism of 1964 gives a possible solution to the problem.

⁶²*Ich weiss an wen ich glaube*, Lektion 53 (Katekismus Anhang).

⁶³Spörri, *Leitfaden*, 94 cf. *Arbeitshilfen für den Katekismusunterricht der Methodistenkirche in Deutschland* (Frankfurt: Anker Verlag, 1962), 125-128. (*Arbeitshilfen*).

explicit: The church is a union of Christians, who have been baptized, have professed their faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior and have accepted the conditions for church membership according to the order of the church. This also involves the necessary training for membership.

At the membership ceremony, the candidate acknowledges the scriptures as the God-given basis for faith and life; professes acceptance in faith of the salvation offered in Jesus Christ through Word and Sacrament; and Jesus as Lord and Savior. Finally, the person pledges allegiance to and support of the Evangelisch-methodistische Kirche. Most interesting, however, are the questions which the candidate does not have to face: there is no renewal of any baptismal vows, nor is there any laying on of hands and invocation (or "confirmation"). That is, German Methodism has chosen not to follow the "Confirmation" emphasis of the 1946 *Book of Worship*.⁶⁴ There is no preparatory Membership, although the concept of "belonging to the Church Family" (*Kirchenangehörige*) seems to be something similar, although without any direct connection and tie to baptism. Nevertheless, children baptized in the church, shall be listed on the roll for "Kirchenangehörige," together with others who desire to be listed as such.⁶⁵ Thus the basic inconsistency in the practice of Preparatory Membership in American Methodism is carried over into the German Church as well, i.e., Preparatory Members are neither members, nor are they *not* members.

Scandinavian Methodism will receive as members "Every person seeking to be saved from his sins, and is earnestly striving to be a Christian in faith and life, . . ." ⁶⁶ The Swedish ritual for the Reception of Members, follows closely the "Order for Confirmation and Reception into the Church" of 1964.⁶⁷ The questions asked of the candidates are quite similar in both Scandinavian rituals, although the Norwegian version is based mostly upon the *Discipline* of 1960. There are two important differences in these two versions: The Swedish follows the 1964 *Discipline* in the opening statement as well as the laying on of hands and the invocation, although without calling the latter "Confirmation" (which shows the built-in ambiguity of the American rite). The Norwegian version gives in the opening statement a different definition of the church: "Holy Scripture teaches us that the Church is the Family of God, the Communion of the Saints, and that Body of which Christ is the Head." The purpose of the church is to save souls and raise up the Kingdom of God on earth. The candidate

⁶⁴*Verfassung und Ordnung der evangelisch-methodistischen Kirche* (Stuttgart: Christliches Verlagshaus GMBH, 1969), pars. 101-109, 57-58. (*Verfassung und Ordnung*), *Book of Worship*, 12-13.

⁶⁵*Verfassung und Ordnung*, 1969, pars. 107, 407, 58, 96.

⁶⁶Swedish *Discipline*, 1964, par. 107, 50; Norwegian *Discipline*, 1964, par. 107, 47.

⁶⁷*Discipline*, 1964, par. 1714, 562 ff.; *Kyrkohandbok*. Sweden, 36-37.

for membership, “. . . shall be firm in his evangelical faith, further peace and unity in the congregation, work to spread love and justice and through word and deed seek to bring others into Christ’s fold.”⁶⁸ That is, the conception of the church, qualifications for membership, and the purpose of it all, tends to be explicitly “evangelical.” There is also in the Norwegian *Ritual* a laying on of hands with prayer, but without any reference to “confirming” anything: “The Lord keep you through his heavenly grace, that you may belong to him all your days and steadily grow in the Holy Spirit, until you at last enter into his eternal Kingdom.”⁶⁹

The Methodist Church of Sweden, therefore, requires of the candidates for membership only that they shall have been baptized and have been instructed in the teachings of the church. The Methodist Church in Norway requires in addition a firm evangelical faith, a peaceful and unifying life, and a desire to actively work to bring others to Christ. Both churches have the renewal of the baptismal vows in their membership rite. Another interesting difference between the two, is that the Swedish version claims that only the church supplies the means of grace, while this is omitted in the Norwegian version of the membership rite.

CONFIRMATION

Neither German nor Swiss Methodism has at the present time any confirmation ceremony. The Order for Confirmation of the 1964 *Discipline* has not yet been adopted. After the completion of the religious training required for full membership, there is a ceremony called “Einsegnung” or “Feier zum Abschluss der kirchliches Unterrichtes,” in which there is an examination (“Prüfung”), prayers of the congregation for these young persons, and a word from Holy Scriptures is given to them. No profession of faith is required, but there is the laying on of hands and prayer for God’s blessing.⁷⁰

Swedish and Norwegian Methodism have something of the same. There is an examination, the saying of the “Apostolic Confession” (by all believers present), and a prayer of dedication. The Norwegian *Ritual* then has the Lord’s Prayer, followed by the benediction said by the pastor, with the laying on of hands, the young persons kneeling. The purpose of these prayers is clearly stated: “You have been baptized in the Christian faith. You have been educated in the Christian faith. Let us now pray that God in his mercy may keep you in his communion.”⁷¹ The Swedish version, however, calls this ceremony “Confirmation,” and has after the prayer of dedication an invocation and the laying on of hands: “Keep,

⁶⁸*Ritual*, Norway, 32.

⁶⁹*Ritual*, Norway, 34.

⁷⁰See, for instance, *Verfassung und Ordnung*, 1969, pars. 412-413, 97; *Arbeitshilfen*, 121-124.

⁷¹*Ritual*, Norway, 30. My translation.

O Lord, this your child with your heavenly grace, that he might remain yours forever. May he steadily grow through the power of your Holy Spirit and at last enter into your eternal Kingdom."⁷² But no vows are taken, there is not even the renewal of the baptismal vows. Calling this ceremony "confirmation" is therefore nothing but a sham, and a yielding to the *social pressures* of the environment.

The same dilemma which is shown in this stance of the Methodist Church of Sweden, prompted the "Erziehungskommission" of the Geneva Area to appoint a small committee to try to find a solution. This committee issued a mimeographed statement,⁷³ in which they first point out that the Methodist Church has actually taken over a ceremony from the established churches around it, a ceremony which many Methodists call "Confirmation," although the content of this rite is missing. Thus, this "Entlassungsfeier" creates confusion in the minds of the people, and puts a pressure upon young people, in that it is expected of them that they also profess their faith and let themselves be received into church membership. The committee, therefore, suggests that the Order for Confirmation, etc., of 1964, be adopted, for these reasons: 1. it is a "yes" to the faith in which he was baptized; 2. it is a "yes" to the Church of Christ; and, then, 3. it is a "yes" to a particular Church, the Methodist Church. Confirmation in the Methodist Church is, therefore, the same ceremony which was earlier called "Reception into Membership." But this approach does not solve the problems, and is open to the same criticisms which are voiced against the Order for Confirmation, etc.⁷⁴ It is a yielding to social pressures, and puts the Methodist Church in the danger of having this ceremony become only a social ceremony and induction into adulthood. If there is a danger that the pressure of what is expected will force a person into membership and a profession of faith before he is ready to do so, this danger should be even greater now, since all of these are joined together in one ceremony. Furthermore, it is presupposed that the persons to be confirmed have consciously committed themselves to Christ before confirmation. The consequence should then be, that persons who were not yet ready or willing to do so, should not be confirmed until they have made such a commitment, but which the social and group pressures will not allow. And, finally, if confirmation is what was called "Reception into the Church" before, then this is also a sham, and the change is only a name-changing act calling something confirmation which is not. The ceremony of "Einsegnung" will disappear with this new "confirmation" rite. But that problem can

⁷²*Kyrkohandbok*, Sweden, 34. My translation.

⁷³"Theologische Stellungnahme über die Bedeutung der kirchlichen Handlung 'Feier zum Abschluss der kirchlichen Unterrichts,' " By Richard Brenneman, Robert Hanson, Hugo Mayr and Helmut Nausner.

⁷⁴See above section on baptism.

be overcome without inviting all the problems the Order for Confirmation, etc., of 1964 entails.

Concluding Remarks

John Wesley, of course, did not develop any special teaching of baptism and membership in the church, except what was expressed in the *Sunday Service*. As has been shown in these articles, he followed the practice and teaching of the Church of England. For the same reason he never developed nor really discussed the rite of confirmation. However, in spite of not having any membership rite for the Methodist societies, he had clear requirements for membership: "There is only one condition previously required of those who desire admission into these societies: 'a desire to flee from the wrath to come, and to be saved from their sins.'"⁷⁵

Wesley's successors soon abandoned his ritual for baptism and the *Sunday Service* as well, although several elements were continued. As time went on, the forms of the various rituals, as well as their theological content, became more and more influenced by the theological mode and mood of that particular time. Not only the language and formal expressions, but even the theology were formed by what was "in" and fashionable—a tendency which can clearly be observed today as well.

The developments in Europe were less influenced by such fluctuations. Although changes did occur, these were rather small and did not change the theological content much at all. Nevertheless, our study has made it clear that changes made at the geographical center of our church (i.e., the U.S.), also have a great impact upon those parts of the church, which live and work within our cultural settings. But even so, enough similarities can be clearly seen to identify the Methodists as "one people" throughout the world.

⁷⁵*Discipline*, 1984, 69.