THE ORIGIN AND USE OF THE SERVICE FOR
THE DEDICATION OF INFANTS
IN THE EVANGELICAL UNITED BRETHREN CHURCH

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The inclusion of documents such as By Water and the Spirit: A United Methodist Understanding of Baptism in The Book of Resolutions of the United Methodist Church highlights the church's efforts to discover the historical approaches to the sacrament of baptism held by its antecedent denominations while struggling to establish a baptismal theology that can serve United Methodists in the future. Meanwhile, pastors who have served in a number of different conferences can appreciate the diversity of religious cultures and understandings of baptism operating in various parts of the United States. In the so-called Bible Belt, where many parents reserve the choice to be baptized for their older children, no more than fifty percent of the young people in a confirmation class may have already been baptized. In the northeast, where a “christening” tradition is more prevalent, such issues surrounding “believer’s baptism” are nonexistent.

Just as the church must come to grips with a variety of approaches to baptism practiced throughout the denomination, so in retracing the history of the sacrament in the tradition it is necessary to identify the variety of views held by the antecedent churches which struggled with the issue of infant baptism even as they planned unions with one another. The practice of infant dedication, officially sanctioned by the Church of the United Brethren in Christ just before the formation of the Evangelical United Brethren Church in 1946, found little support in the new denomination as the sacrament of infant baptism continued to be the preferred service for small children and gained in popularity during the church’s brief history. According to By Water and the Spirit:

Following the union of 1946, the Evangelical United Brethren Church adopted a ritual that included services of baptism for infants and adults, and also a newly created service for the dedication of infants that had little precedent in official rituals of either of the former churches.2

2By Water and the Spirit, 800.
The Evangelical United Brethren Church was created in 1946 by the union of the Evangelical Church and the Church of the United Brethren in Christ. These denominations held much in common, including the German background of their founders, Arminian theology, and an episcopal/conference polity. The service for infant dedication entered the new church through the United Brethren side, surfacing as an official ritual just prior to union. Conference records show that it was not widely practiced. It is necessary to examine the church’s views of infant baptism since the service for dedication was provided as an alternative to the Christian sacrament.

Infant baptism was practiced in the Evangelical tradition from its beginning and in 1829 the Western Annual Conference forbade rebaptism of a person baptized as an infant because there was no provision in either the Discipline or the New Testament for repetition of the sacrament. This was an affirmation of the validity of the first baptism. Ten years later the church’s General Conference cautioned against the frequent practice of rebaptism and forbade any minister to advocate it, but held that a person baptized as an infant could be rebaptized. In a book published in 1929, What Evangelicals Believe, Samuel Spreng wrote:

> We hold Baptism to be the initial ordinance whereby we are received into the visible Church and are identified with the people of God as professed Disciples of Jesus Christ, as believers in him.  

According to Spreng, Evangelicals also believed that, “it is proper and Scriptural to baptize children, that is, infants, because Jesus definitely declared ‘of such is the Kingdom of Heaven’ Matt. 18:3.” The last Discipline of the Evangelical Church (1943) included a service for the baptism of infants but did not mention infants specifically in the sacramental statement in the Articles of Faith:

> Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, ordained by Christ, are not pledges or tokens of Christian men’s profession; but they are rather certain signs of God’s grace and good will toward us, by which He works invisibly in us, and also strengthens and confirms our faith in him.  

Thus, the issue of infant baptism never surfaced in the Evangelical tradition, though it did present itself in the history of the United Brethren. The founders of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ represented diverse theological backgrounds. Martin Boehm, for example, was a Mennonite, coming from a group with roots in the Anabaptist movement of the 16th cen-

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3 Spreng, 133.
4 *Doctrines and Discipline of the Evangelical Church* (Harrisburg, PA: Evangelical Publishing House, 1943), 21.
Dedication of Infants

Many of their members were rebaptized as adults, thereby repudiating their baptisms as infants in the Roman Catholic Church. Pouring was their favorite mode. Other founders were German Baptists, or "Dunkers." They baptized adults by immersion in "living" water (usually a stream). Phillip William Otterbein was from the Reformed background which recognized all modes as well as the practice of infant baptism itself. None of these groups viewed baptism as a particularly "saving ordinance."7

With regard to the mode and proper subject for baptism, remarkable unity and compromise prevailed within the United Brethren camp. The Discipline produced by the first United Brethren General Conference (1815) established baptism, "according to the command of the Lord Jesus; the mode and manner, however, shall be left to the judgment of everyone."8 Concern for denominational harmony outweighed any passion for theological and liturgical definitives. The General Conferences of 1853, 1857 and 1861 all heard demands that a more precise stand on baptism be taken, but the petitions were tabled each time. No attempt was made to deal with the questions of the mode and subjects for baptism after 1861. A ritual for the dedication of infants was inserted beside the existing service of baptism of infants in the Discipline of 1945, the last before union.9

There is some indication that disagreement over the issue of infant baptism/dedication grew more intense over the last fifty years of the history of the United Brethren church. D. N. Howe presented the case against infant baptism in 1889:

Though very few Protestants believe absolutely in baptismal regeneration, yet many believe that some influence of the Holy Spirit is associated with baptism, which conveys grace to the soul of the infant or shields it from the severer temptations of youth. But after all, this is baptismal regeneration in a diluted form. The baptism of infants is something very different from the baptism of adults. Adult baptism is designed to be initiatory to the church: but infant baptism is not, for no church calls its baptized infants members, though its standards may so teach.10

Howe further denied actual baptism to infants because certain expectations of church membership were beyond an infant's capability. The infant could not perform the duties of a church member, was incapable of worship (and therefore could not experience the baptism as a means of grace), needed no pardon and could not make a vow or pledge of faithfulness or exercise intelligent choice or personal faith. For Howe, the only thing com-

7 Behney and Eller, 17, 19, 40, 162, 163.
8 Behney and Eller, 109.
9 Behney and Eller, 163, 255, 360.
mon to adult and infant baptism was the idea of the dedication of the individual. Therefore, he preferred to speak of "infant consecration." For him, consecration had all the benefits and none of the objections to baptism. Nevertheless, such an act was important and should not be neglected because of scruples over terminology:

If infants can't be members of the church, they may, nevertheless, be set apart unto the Lord by consecration. ... the consecration of young children in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, fully accords with the sentiment of scripture.  

The official line stood, nonetheless. Bishop Weaver's book, A Practical Comment on the Confession of Faith (1893), described a "proper subject" for the "ordinance" as "an adult believer, or children of believing parents." His statement on the "Baptism of Children" reflected typical United Brethren practicality but betrayed an episcopal view closer to tolerance than advocation:

The baptism of children has always been left to the judgment and understanding of believing parents. It has been practiced in the Church from its organization, but not required. Believing parents who desire in this public manner to consecrate their children to the Lord should not be denied their privilege of doing so. This is, and always has been the spirit of the United Brethren Church—tenacious on essentials, but liberal on non-essentials.  

Yet A. W. Drury came to the unequivocal defense of infant baptism a decade later. He included "baptismal regeneration" among the "errors" most commonly associated with baptism, but he answered most of the objections put forward by Howe. Drury explained that the scriptures do not mention the baptism of children because they, "reveal the state and position of adults, especially of those to whom the gospel is preached. . . ." He insisted that infant baptism was not so much an option as a necessity:

To allow the child to grow up under natural impulse, chance or fate, is to rob him of choice, character, and God-given rights. If parents are in doubt as to the claims of the Christian religion on their children, they might as well dismiss its claims upon themselves.  

For Drury, baptism was an initiatory rite replacing circumcision in the covenant. Quoting Matthew 18:3 and 19:14, 15, he asked, "If Christ says that adults are to become as little children, why should we insist that little children are to become like adults before they shall be recognized as having a place in the kingdom?" He gave particular authority to scripture passages describing the baptisms of households. He also cited historical evidence-  

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11Howe, 496, 497.  
12Jonathan Weaver, A Practical Comment on the Confession of Faith of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ (Dayton: United Brethren Publishing House, 1893), 113, 118. Note that several years earlier Weaver had edited the book in which Howe's support of "consecration" as over against baptism appeared.  
Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and other church fathers. Drury maintained that a kind of confirmation was required at a later age:

We may disagree with the word "confirmation" and also with customary forms, and use the simplest and commonest terms for the act and mode in which the child acknowledges and processes his personal acceptance of salvation and enters on the obligations of Christian life and service, but let all this, with the instruction and nurture implied, be regarded as the necessary constituent or complement of baptism.

Certainly, neither Howe nor Drury held a strictly sacramental understanding of baptism, but Howe drew the line at infant consecration while Drury pushed for the reality of infant baptism. At the turn of the last century the diversity of United Brethren attitudes toward infant baptism was as great as ever.

The ecclesiastical fence was further straddled in 1945 when a ritual for the dedication of infants was included in the Discipline for the first time. The timing of the publication of this ritual may have been influenced by the impending union with the Evangelicals. The proposed Discipline for the Evangelical United Brethren Church, drawn up in 1942, included the United Brethren Confession of Faith with its statement that the baptism of children be left to the judgment of believing parents. The section on "Children and the Church" mentioned baptism but not dedication. A service for infant baptism was included, but there was no ritual for dedication. Nonetheless, on the very eve of church union, the United Brethren General Conference approved a recommendation from the Board of Christian Education that dedicated children (an acknowledgment that such already existed) be placed on the church's children's membership record at the request of the parents. To facilitate that, it was further agreed that "the Board of Bishops be instructed to prepare a ritual for service of consecration or dedication of children" and that "this form be placed in the Discipline...under 'Formulas and Forms.'"

Considering the diversity of opinion among the United Brethren and the relative consensus among Evangelicals regarding infant baptism, it is probable that supporters of infant dedication were anxious to insert such a service into United Brethren official ritual before union precluded it. The service was carried over into the Evangelical United Brethren Discipline since it had gained authentication as a practice of an antecedent denomination. The new church launched a study of its rituals to be conducted during the first quadrennium and a book of rituals was published the following

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14 Drury, 68-73.
15 Drury, 87.
16 The Discipline of the Evangelical United Brethren Church, Joint Commission on Church Federation and Union (Dayton: Otterbein Press, 1942), 42, 103, 348-354.
decade. The new *Discipline* underscored the position that children of believing parents were entitled to baptism while providing for children nine to ten years old a kind of catechesis designed to instruct and lead to a personal acceptance of Jesus Christ, culminating in church membership.

In working toward a more authentic union, the Evangelical United Brethren Church adopted in 1962 the Confession of Faith as the continuance of the traditions maintained in both predecessor denominations. In regard to the sacraments, the new Confession described baptism and the Lord’s Supper as “symbols and pledges of the Christian’s profession and of God’s love toward us. They are means of grace by which God works invisibly in us, quickening, strengthening, and confirming our faith in him.” The remarks regarding baptism were plain and straightforward:

We believe baptism signifies entrance into the household of faith, and is a symbol of repentance and inner cleansing from sin, a representation of the new birth in Christ Jesus and a mark of Christian discipleship.

We believe children are under the atonement of Christ and as heirs of the kingdom of God are acceptable subjects for Christian baptism. Children of believing parents through baptism become the special responsibility of the church. They should be nurtured and led to a personal acceptance of Christ, and by profession of faith confirm their baptism.

Details of the published services of infant baptism and dedication reveal similarities and differences between the two rites. The United Brethren *Discipline* of 1945 included a separate service for children aged nine to twelve “who have already received the grace of God in a definite acceptance of the Lord Jesus Christ as their Savior, and who have been duly instructed in the meaning of the Christian life.” The service of infant baptism consisted primarily of an exhortation to the parents to raise the child in a God-fearing and Christian manner. The dedication service was more complex, including a statement about the scriptural basis for dedicating children to God and an exhortation to parents to “seek to provide in your home a Christian atmosphere, in which this tender ‘bud of promise’ may blossom unto a ‘fragrant flower.’” The congregation was also asked to commit itself. The dedication was “announced” with a Trinitarian formula. It ended with the rubric: “A rose bud may be given each child as a memento which will be cherished as a prophecy of unfolding life.”

The first official *Discipline* of the Evangelical United Brethren Church (1947) included longer and shorter forms for infant baptism in which the parents were addressed as “presenting this child to be dedicated to the Lord

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19Behney and Eller, 360.

20Discipline of the Evangelical United Brethren Church (Dayton: Board of Publication of the Evangelical United Brethren Church, 1967), 24, 25, 27.

by Holy Baptism.” The service of infant dedication was identical to that entered into the United Brethren ritual in 1945.22

The *Book of Ritual* (1959 edition) provided one service each for infant baptism and dedication. The baptism service did not refer to “dedication” at all but reminded the parents that they were “presenting this child for infant baptism.” There was a congregational pledge. The church may have been responding to the need to distinguish the two services. The dedication service was much like that from 1945 with the exception that the congregation was addressed at the beginning rather than the end and no congregational response was included. In form and language the dedication service resembled the baptismal ritual. The most significant change in the dedication service over time was in the wording that altered the role of the minister and put the statement in a more active voice:

Dedication, 1945

______, as a Minister of Jesus Christ, who laid his hands upon the heads of little children in blessing, I announce your dedication to God and His Church, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Dedication, 1945

______, as a Minister of Jesus Christ, who laid his hands upon the heads of little children in blessing, I dedicate you to God and his Church, in the name of God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.23

Clearly the dedication service became more like the service of baptism as the minister’s action moved from announcing to dedicating. Even after the introduction of such a ritual the dedication of infants was not widely practiced in the church. Sacramental tendencies were strong in both predecessor denominations. For whatever reason, the record shows that infant baptism was favored by Evangelical United Brethren parents and, one may assume, the pastors who provided spiritual direction.

The *Yearbook* of the Evangelical United Brethren Church did not include statistics for infant dedications in the beginning. United Brethren statistics in the 1947 issue (the year ending the previous September 30) recorded conversions and the number of people received on confession of faith, but not the number baptized and dedicated. In the same issue Evangelical Church statistics showed that in most annual conferences infant baptisms were more common than adult baptisms. Denominational totals were 8,021 and 3,085, respectively. In 1948 there were 21,116 baptisms of children and 9,611 adult baptisms in the new church. This disparity was maintained throughout the history of the church. A denomination in which the

baptism of children was a frequent practice saw less value in a service of infant dedication. Statistics for 1952–1955, the only years in which the categories are clearly divided in such a way, bear this out:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Adult Baptisms</th>
<th>Baptisms of Children</th>
<th>Dedications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>11,622</td>
<td>20,303</td>
<td>1,988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1953</td>
<td>10,214</td>
<td>20,518</td>
<td>2,811</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1954</td>
<td>10,738</td>
<td>21,929</td>
<td>2,431</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1955</td>
<td>11,384</td>
<td>22,043</td>
<td>2,248</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While the figures remain fairly stable, it is clear that infant dedications gain in popularity, but then decline after 1953. At the same time, while the number of adult baptisms fluctuates slightly, the number of baptisms of children continues to rise during the four years in question. On a smaller scale, for example, the Ohio Sandusky Conference, the church’s fifth largest in 1968, kept separate dedication statistics between 1951 and 1954:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Baptisms of Children</th>
<th>Dedications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>375</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>365</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1953</td>
<td>377</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1954</td>
<td>452</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Practice in the Ohio Sandusky Conference reflected that of the denomination in general. The number of dedications fell sharply while the number of baptisms rose slowly, but perceptibly. After this period, denominational and conference records tended either not to record the number of dedications or include them together with baptisms in a single category. But these figures provide enough information to conclude that during the church’s brief history (1946–1968) the service for infant dedication was not a popular rite, that baptism was the ritual of choice, and that the number of dedications tended to decline annually while the number of baptisms tended to increase.

It is also clear that the service for dedication of infants originated in the United Brethren church before the union where there was some disagreement regarding the appropriateness of infant baptism. The church’s General Conference did not deal with the issue from 1861 until the impending union with the Evangelical Church with its relative consensus favoring baptism. Despite the fact that the United Brethren represented the larger of the two ecclesiastical bodies, fears that Evangelical sacramental theology would prevail in the new church encouraged the United Brethren to make the dedication option official before the union, thus insuring its place in subsequent Evangelical United Brethren ritual.