

# *Ecclesiology and Sacraments in an Ecumenical Context*

## *Working Group Paper*

### *Introduction*

To give focus to our theme "Ecclesiology and Sacraments in an Ecumenical Context," we studied and discussed the convergence statements on Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry finalized at Lima in January 1982, after more than fifty years of work by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches. This procedure commended itself, inasmuch as these are the most broadly based agreements on these topics in the history of the modern ecumenical movement (including Roman Catholic and Orthodox participation), and the churches of world Methodism will be asked to respond to the entire statement by December 1985 from our Wesleyan and Methodist perspective.

The statements proved to be a fruitful point of initiation for our careful study of Methodist ecclesiology and sacramental theology. Although we ourselves, as members of the same world family, did not agree at all points, we found that we were in substantial agreement with many elements of the text. Since these are vital parts of our own ecclesiology, we will share with the Institute the major points of our agreement. We will also list issues that we think require research and further development by Methodist theological scholarship.

#### *I. Baptism*

- A. Points of agreement with the *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry (BEM)* text from the point of view of Methodist theology:

- (1) Baptism is both God's gift and our human response to that gift. Its objective grounding is in the total ministry of Jesus Christ. Baptism is one of the dominical sacraments.
  - (2) God bestows on all baptized persons the anointing and the promise of the Holy Spirit, and implants in their hearts the first fruit of this inheritance as children of God.
  - (3) The Holy Spirit nurtures the life of faith in the baptized person.
  - (4) Both infant and believers' baptism embody God's initiative in Christ and express a response of faith made within the believing community.
  - (5) Those baptized are pardoned, cleansed, and sanctified by Christ, and are given as part of their baptismal experience a new ethical orientation under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
- B. Issues for further research, reflection, and articulation:
- (1) What is the relationship between God's prevenient grace, flowing out of the work of Christ, and the process of initiation? How do we understand the universality of grace?
  - (2) What is the relation between baptism as an event and initiation as a process? That is, what is the relation between God's gift of grace in baptism and God's continuing gift of grace in the process of initiation, a process which includes and requires a person's faith commitment?
  - (3) In what way does our one baptism, and our acceptance of each other's baptism, constitute a call to the churches to overcome their separateness?

#### *II. Eucharist*

In regard to eucharist, our study centered on Christ's presence and his sacrifice, and derivatively, frequency of celebration and the treatment of the elements.

- A. Points of agreement with the *BEM* text from the point of view of Methodist theology:

- (1) Emerging agreement on *anamnesis* was noted and appreciated; the supper is the living and effective sign of Christ's sacrifice. Christ's sacrifice is unique, accomplished once and for all on the cross. The sign character can be seen in different ways. It is the same Jesus who died who is present in the eucharist to give us benefits now.
  - (2) Word and sacrament belong together.
  - (3) We note that the eucharistic hymns of the Wesleys reflect a doctrine of Christ's presence in the elements. Accordingly we concur with the statement on eucharist that the presence of Christ does not depend on our faith, but that faith is vital to discern Christ's body and blood. It is by the Holy Spirit that the bread and wine become the sacramental signs of Christ's body and blood. Jesus Christ is present in a special way to the Christian community and the individual Christian in the celebration of the eucharist.
- B. Issues for further research, reflection, and articulation:
- (1) John Wesley and early Methodists received the sacrament frequently, and the *BEM* document suggests that eucharist be the normal Sunday service. Should eucharist be celebrated at least every Sunday in Methodist churches?
  - (2) The treatment of unused elements reflects the theological understanding of eucharist. More work needs to be done on this question among Methodists.
  - (3) The *mystery* always present in the eucharist is recognized in the *BEM* document. We appreciate the inclusion of this dimension. Because Methodism incorporates elements of both Eastern and Western thought, it may serve as a model of legitimate diversity in unity concerning the eucharist.

### III. Ministry

- A. Points of agreement with the *BEM* document:
- (1) Ministry is grounded in Christology, with a trinitarian basis.
  - (2) The question of ministry begins with the whole people of God.
  - (3) Ordained ministry is representative of the normative ministry of Jesus Christ and also of the ministry of the whole church.
  - (4) Tradition comprises the continuity of the faith and life of the church; episcopal succession is one element within this tradition.
  - (5) Ordained ministry includes calling by God, prayer for the Spirit, discernment of gifts, and authenticating by the church. Ordination is not merely a functional differentiation; it is a sacramental act for Methodists.
  - (6) The ordained minister is involved in a ministry of word and sacrament, in a community of discipline and accountability.
  - (7) When representative ministry is open to women, it is blessed by them. We commend this to the whole church.
- B. Issues for further research, reflection, and articulation:
- (1) What is the relation between ordination and education?
  - (2) Serious attention needs to be given to theological concepts of the three-fold ministry by Methodists. In particular we note the need for attention to historical, theological, and ecumenical concerns with the *diaconate*. The group notes its concern with proposed unilateral and unecumenical action toward the creation of a "lay diaconate" among United Methodists.
  - (3) Are there elements in our tradition that move us to accept the "sign of episcopal succession" as the *BEM* document suggests?
  - (4) The focus of ordained ministry may be in the local eucharistic community, but its relation to

the whole church (international fellowship) needs attention as well.

#### IV. *Ecclesiology*

In this section we will mention several issues of systematic importance to consideration of the doctrine of the church in Methodism.

##### A. *Membership*

The BEM document says that baptism unites the one baptized with Christ and with his people, and this directly raises questions about membership of the church. Christ died for all, and God seeks by prevenient grace to work in every human heart. "When an infant is baptized, his personal response will be offered at a later moment in life." Baptized infants are received in an important sense as members of the church, but in some churches it is not until a later time in their lives that they are received as members in some other sense. This difficulty, which concerns many churches, also is made more acute in Methodism because of our societary origins.

In Methodist usage, the membership of infants is described in various ways such as "real but incomplete," or "preparatory membership," and the later membership as "membership of society," "full membership," or "membership of the church as an organization." The relation of the two is not always clear. Although the term "confirmation" was not originally used in Methodism at all, it is often used now to refer to this later completion of baptism in church membership. This uncertainty about the status of baptized children also affects the question of whether they should receive Holy Communion.

##### B. *The Denomination and the Church Universal*

The discussion of liturgical acts raises the question whether baptism, confirmation, or ordination are related to the universal church or to the denomination. It might perhaps be said that they are performed for the universal church (whether or not

they are recognized by other denominations, as they should be), but they are also performed within a particular denomination that has the immediate responsibility of discipline, pastoral care, and support.

Geoffrey Wainwright, in his paper, suggests that the New Testament and the mission to spread scriptural holiness alike require the structural unity of the church. Denominations, according to this view, must be regarded as provisional. He considers the possibility that the particular spiritual tradition now represented by a denominational family might be kept alive by something like a religious order within the universal church. The universal church should consist of locally united churches (however locality is defined), bound together in conciliar fellowship where decisions are made together in matters which concern all.

The religious orders within such a universal church would need some organization, but much less than the present denominations have. These religious orders would be in some tension with the structures of the church, but here tension would be kept within bounds. Are some of our traditions mere preferences, which need to be judged by the great Tradition of the universal church?

There are serious questions, however, whether Methodism's mission might be impaired by entering into structural unions; whether local unions whittle down the strength of the denominational family; whether it would be better to await the results of the bilaterals; whether there is not danger in the idea of a "super-church" (despite the fact that no one favors the term), and in the creation of national churches which lack adequate international links. The question also arises whether the full unity of the church does not belong to the "last things." Should we begin within the Methodist family, for instance, through closer relations, or even union, among the historic

black Methodist Episcopal churches and United Methodism?

Another question concerns the continuing role of the World Methodist Council. Should it be transmuted into a pan-Methodist church or in some other way maintain a strong international denominational emphasis seeking closer relationship with other world bodies through multilaterals. Or should it, without any strengthening of its organization, be engaged in the development of a Methodist order in the *Una Sancta*?

C. *Authority*

The question arises where the teaching authority of the church resides. Is there a role for the Bishop of Rome as a unifying factor within the church? The present claims for the magisterium in the Church of Rome are not acceptable to many Christians, yet the nature of teaching authority needs fuller investigation, as does the relation of primacy to conciliarity.

In all of these questions, issues, and concerns, the group recognizes that there are serious historical, societal, and cultural realities at work in the life of the church which complicate application of theological principles. Moreover, for Methodism, theological principles are not easily invested with authority for ordering the life of the church.

D. *Theological Traditions within Methodism*

Our group is aware through its study and discussion that world Methodism contains elements of what might be called "low" and "high" understandings of ecclesiology and the sacraments. We think that continuing serious study, reflection, and articulation of the intentions of the diverse theological strands of Methodism will prove fruitful. Without such attention, these differences will be problematic. Methodism is both evangelical and catholic; John Wesley himself always held these dimensions together. Insistence on the unity of these dimensions is a hallmark of Methodism in the universal church.

*Conclusion*

We, as a group, are mindful of the fact that all we have discussed is in service to the total worldwide mission of the church. The sacraments are gifts of God through which God's grace is given unto us all. The structures of the church are intended to enable and enhance our love for one another and all persons. The urgent needs of the world and its peoples are uppermost in our minds as we seek to understand the way Methodism can be free to be about God's work of deliverance, mission, and unity. Personal and social holiness are gifts of God; they also involve determined human engagement.

Finally, to the Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies, the group suggests that the *BEM* document, aiming as it does to provide the churches with a reconciling statement of what we can say together, challenges us to rethink our own Wesleyan and Methodist positions. What are the elements more or less unique to us that we want to commend to this emerging consensus? What, on the other hand, are idiosyncracies that have crept into our thinking, which we might relinquish with no great loss?

Having thus commented on these *BEM* texts, we wish as an Institute to recommend to churches in the Methodist family a serious study of and response to these documents, to the end that we may make a contribution to the growing agreement, identifying and rectifying any eccentricities among us that take us beyond acceptable diversity within the church catholic.