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An Attempt to Describe
THE CORE OF METHODIST DOCTRINE
from a German Perspective

A Brief Paper by Manfred Marquardt, Reutlingen

On the 29th of September 1987, a memorable worship service will be held in the old famous St.Laurence Church in Nürnberg: the West-German Methodist Bishop Hermann Sticher, his episcopal colleagues and heads of the United Lutheran Church in Germany and the Evangelical Church in Germany¹ as well as a large congregation of members of these churches will celebrate the declaration of full fellowship of Word and sacrament (including pulpit exchanges and full sacramental union, though no organizational merger). After one and a half century, during which strife and struggle, suppression and disdain, misunderstanding and misrepresentation have decreased but not disappeared, this will be a day of true thanksgiving to God and the working power of the Holy Spirit. As a member of the Joint Commission which, by a series of dialogues, was to prepare this agreement, I would like to describe the core of Methodist doctrine as it became especially clear during our conversations with the Lutheran sisters and brothers, who - together with us - declared the common understanding of the Gospel as the basis of our new fellowship². I will do this, not by reducing the Methodist position to the difference between our doctrine and that of the Reformation churches, but by describing the Methodist accent of the common reformatory basis.

(1) The first theme, in which this accent was to be recognized, was that of baptism and reception into the membership of the church. Whereas we both agreed in the conviction that it is God's

¹ That is no "evangelical" church in the narrow sense of this word, but the union of the protestant territorial churches (Landeskirchen) in Germany (Lutheran, Reformed, United).

² Comp.Confessio Augustana VII: "Et ad veram unitatem ecclesiae satis est consentire de doctrina evangelii et de administratione sacramentorum."

church. ~~Whereas we both agreed in the conviction that it is God's~~ grace alone, received by faith alone, which embodies people into the church of Christ and that this unconditional grace is made visible by the sacrament of baptism, and therefore (infant) baptism as such is the incorporation into the church, Methodists stress that those persons who are baptized and have professed their faith are to be received into the fellowship of the church. Baptism and the confession of faith are the two sides of a process by which God's grace enables a human being to receive what Christ has achieved for him/her. The Methodist stress lies on prevenient grace as the origin of our salvation and personal faith as the grateful acceptance. As the nature of the new life, which God creates in humans, is subsisting above all in a certain personal relation with God, a relation of faith, hope, and love, that saving power becomes effective in an individual on his/her consent. God's unconditional acceptance of the sinner must find its answer in his/her belief and trust in this acceptance. God's unbounded love is gaining its end by flooding the heart of a person and by thus enabling him/her to cry 'Abba, Father !' In this cry the Spirit of God joins with every believer in testifying that he/she is a child of God. In a country, where Christendom has become, as the former bishop of Hamburg, Hans-Otto Wölber used to say, a "Religion without Decision"¹ it seems to be the more important to have a place for the decision-making on the way to church membership and thereby to make visible that God's love wants to move us to love him again and our neighbours as ourselves. Every member of a church should have had the clear opportunity to confess his/her faith vis a vis the congregation into which they are being received as full members. *Confirmation?*

(2) We agreed in the conviction that Christ himself is the Lord of His Supper which the churches administer, that He invites people to sharing the meal at His table and to receiving the remission of their sins, the strengthening of their faith and the relief of their burdens. Methodists stress that there should be no restriction of any kind for coming to the Lord's Table except the one: that a person honestly wants to receive what Christ

¹ Hans-Otto Wölber, Religion ohne Entscheidung. Volkskirche am Beispiel der jungen Generation, Göttingen 1959

Leads to adult baptism?

gives. Therefore they offer the sacrament even to those who have not yet been baptized, but long for sharing the benefits of Christ's atonement. The foundation of the church as well as of our lives as Christians lies in God's unconditioned and unbounded love for all human beings. The revelation of this love has its centre and its essential content in the self-manifestation of God in Christ Jesus. Through Him God has provided a salvation for all human beings, living in a sinful estrangement from their creator. Therefore, all persons are invited and bound to put their trust for eternal life neither in themselves nor in other persons, but only in the redeeming love of God. If this holds true all Christian churches are authorized and bound to offer this salvation to all men and women without exception and to do this by using all their talents and gifts and by availing of all opportunities. Therefore we are in agreement with John Wesley who was convinced by the Word of God and by many experiences that the Lord's Supper was a means of conversion as it was a means of mediating all other kinds of grace.

(3) It was a Lutheran professor who, during our first meeting, told us about his impression that Luther had defined well what a Christian is, but that he left his followers alone with the question how a Christian should live. Even if this observation should be exaggerated to a certain extent, there is a somewhat static character in the religion of the "simul iustus, simul peccator". Thus, the final report of the Lutheran-Methodist Dialogue in Westgermany stated frankly: "Whereas the Lutherans emphasize that holiness is God's gift in his work of justification, Methodists, in their understanding of holiness, lay particular stress on the life-changing experience of God's grace and on growing in love."¹ The transforming power of the Holy Spirit, leading to conversion and faith, is to shape the whole lives of believers more and more into the image of God and, by using renewed persons, to change the whole range of societal life according to the will of God. These two aspects, being closely

¹ Report p.4, par.12: "Während Lutheraner die Heiligung als Gabe Gottes im Geschehen der Rechtfertigung herausstellen, legen Methodisten in ihrem Verständnis der Heiligung besonderes Gewicht auf die lebensverändernde Erfahrung der Gnade Gottes und das Wachsen in der Liebe."

connected with one another, cannot be separated from each other without endangering the Christian life: first, the renewing work of the Spirit, including the regeneration and the sanctification of the whole Christian person, of life and work, and second the growth and maturation in Christian living, including the process of being perfected in the love of God and our neighbours.

This process obviously includes the Christian involvement for a society in which all human beings are respected as equally esteemed persons, a society of justice and peace, of freedom and well-being. This Christian task is not restricted, as we believe, to the members of one's own nation, but embraces all men and women of all nations, races, classes, and convictions. Being dependent on and trusting in God's active presence in this world and the lives of all human beings, Methodists should be able and prepared to be engaged in every good work and endeavour within the scope of their possibilities. But too often, Methodism in Germany is weakened by the attitude of members who, in a misunderstanding the function of personal piety, fall back upon a private Christianity, in which the responsibility for other people is reduced to charity and personal witness. In cases of conflict, they often prove to be in the first place what they are by nature and education: German, white, well-to-do, and mostly conservative.

Believing in the renewing power of God's grace, which gives us a new identity as justified sinners, as sick who are being healed, as - in Paul's words - new creatures, we can be set free for a new partnership with God and humans, we can become what the Christian community shall be: the social form of the Gospel, brother- and sisterhood which can be experienced; we are able to overcome and to help to overcome loneliness and fear, the two great experiences of shock in our present-day society. One of the strengths of Methodism was the ability to preach the Gospel and to give witness through the lives of men and women who had been renewed, who were ready to take over responsibility for others inside and outside their societies. For this, information is required ranging from "needful advices"¹ to scientific analysis

¹ See J. Wesley, in the report about the founding of classes, Works VIII, 269.

which is necessary in many fields for a qualified decision. There is always need for a warm heart as well as for a clear head. Methodists in Germany are about to learn from Wesley and from others how to deal with social, economic, legal, and (other) political questions and to connect these activities to the proclamation of the Gospel as our first priority. We are required to be partners of politicians, scientists, technologists, and other people bearing great responsibility for the future of mankind on this earth.

Thus, Methodism's contributions to the ecumenical and the societal life is not so much being ahead of others on the way of comprehensive sanctification but being aware of what we miss, what we should pray for and where we should press on, hoping to take hold of what still lies ahead.

*Relation to eschat (cf. Bult - Luth, and Molt-Ref.)
Do Reformed elements in EKD taken into account?*