

‘Children and Holy Communion’ and the theological direction of the Methodist Church

Rev John M Haley

The Methodist Conference (2000) adopted a new report on *Children and Holy Communion* which recommended ‘that it be considered normal practice for baptized children, as members of the whole body of Christ, to participate in Holy Communion by receiving bread and wine, irrespective of age.’

The Methodist emphasis on the ‘means of grace’ goes back to Wesley himself. Wesley taught that there were three things essential to the church: living faith, preaching or hearing the pure word of God, and the due administration of the sacraments. He was convinced that God had in Scripture ordained prayer, reading or hearing of Scripture, and receiving the Lord’s Supper as the ordinary means of conveying his grace to people. The Wesleys received the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper regularly. Indeed one of the many labels attached to the Oxford Holy Club as well as ‘Methodists’ was ‘Sacramentarians’. Fifty years later, when giving directions to the fledgling Methodist Church in America, John Wesley stated that the American Methodists should receive the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper every Sunday.

Despite the modern ‘Methodist myth’ that Methodism has always had an open table, strictly speaking this is not so. The Moravians, who greatly influenced Wesley, and the Independents generally only admitted the converted to communion. Wesley’s line was rather different. He believed very strongly that ‘the Lord’s Supper could be a converting as well as a confirming ordinance.’ Wesley never really had a coherent theory of Christian initiation after his own evangelical conversion led to the partial abandonment of his High Church ideas. Though Methodists did not require proof of actual conversion by 1747 notes of admission were distributed. These were later replaced by class-tickets. In effect communion was therefore limited to members of the society. Belonging to the society was on the basis of a member’s desire ‘to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins’. In that sense the table was neither fenced, that is restricted only to the ‘saved’, nor open to all, but open to those who were earnestly desiring salvation. In short, the qualification for admission to the Methodist Society was not the experience of having been ‘saved’ but the earnest desire to be so. This earnest desire was shown by membership of the Methodist Society with its strict discipline. It is in this context that we must understand what Wesley meant by the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper as a ‘converting ordinance’ and not as a Sacrament in isolation from this earnest desire to be saved. It was a continual response to the grace of God that brought the person seeking saving faith from the ‘porch through the very door of salvation.’

The report gives some consideration to ‘understanding’. We must be thankful that theological understanding is not necessary for participation in the worshipping life of the church. However, it seems strange to imply that those capable of doing so should not understand the theological significance of what they are doing. The new report claims that ‘where children have been admitted there have been widespread spiritual benefits for the whole congregation.’ This is a fashionable and rather cheerful thing to say. However, one wonders what these ‘widespread spiritual benefits’ are and whether they can be measured or assessed in any kind of meaningful way. One wonders if children perceive the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving as ‘the climax of the liturgy’ and whether such thinking is something that they would readily share.

The new report rightly states that ‘the worthiness of anyone to receive the Body and Blood of Christ is based solely on the grace of God.’ However, the ‘worthiness’ of the individual sharing in bread and wine at the Lord’s Supper (which the Scriptures do not require, except in Christ) is different from the ‘worthy manner’ of such participation and it is regrettable that these two very separate ideas are so easily confused.

It seems that what is happening in the Methodist Church is that the theology of the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper is being changed. There is a growing emphasis on all-age worship or at least the whole church community coming together for ‘Family Communion’ that is becoming, or in many places has become, the focal point of local church worship. Not so long ago, however, the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper was still primarily a solemn self-examination prior to a renewed realisation of the benefits of the death and resurrection of Christ. Undoubtedly sociological factors are important here. The Methodist perception of the purpose of Holy Communion is being changed by the modern wish to be inclusive. The consequence of this is that it is thought undesirable to make any visible division between converted and unconverted, saved or unsaved, perhaps even to the point of rejecting that such division is valid at all. Methodists have long abandoned the idea that participation in the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper requires any formal expression of faith or commitment and with some logic say if that is the case for adults there is no reason not to include children.

When Wesley took an unusual and original line that he was willing to admit those who were earnest seekers to the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper he could, in all probability, have safely assumed that the members of the society had been baptized in the Church of England. It is, however, abundantly clear that Wesley believed that the new birth was different from baptism. He resisted the idea that just because a person had been baptized that person was still a Christian. An entire change of heart was absolutely necessary.

The only necessity, according to the Conference report, for receiving the elements in the Lord's Supper is that a child be baptized. Many younger Methodist members seem to be deciding not to have their children baptized so that they may choose believer's baptism in later life. We are in some senses moving to the rather odd position that children of some Methodist parents are not baptized, while their friends in Sunday School, from homes where the parents hardly ever come to the church, are baptized. The official Methodist line is now that children who are not baptized (even if they are from 'Christian homes' and come to the church every week) may not receive the elements at Holy Communion but children who kneel beside them (who may just be visiting for the first time since their baptism) may. This is supposed to be pastorally sensitive and inclusive but it looks like a muddle to me and to many Ministers who have to make decisions in a flash at the communion rail and contend with the wishes and consciences of the parents too.

In his book 'Reasonable Enthusiast', Henry Rack gets to the very heart of the tension felt in Wesley's comments when he says 'if real Christianity begins with conversion, it puts in question the meaning and propriety of infant baptism.' Ideas of the 'new birth' sit uneasily with the practice of infant baptism. Is baptism or the 'new birth' the real beginning of the Christian life? What becomes apparent in considering the Wesleys' approach to the sacraments is that they were wrestling with the tension of being an evangelical society of Methodists and their own tradition as High Churchmen within the Church of England. This was a tension that was not resolved in their lifetime. It is a tension that in some real ways the Methodist Church still feels. The old Methodist way of thinking was something of a compromise. Baptism was seen as a partial admission into the visible Christian community, a sign of the grace of God, and 'Full Membership' was seen as a further step tied to admission to Holy Communion. The unbaptized receiving Holy Communion was not an issue because baptism was a prerequisite of Methodist membership. Methodists are now being invited to move their theology and practice of Holy Communion away from the 'evangelical' position, stressing conversion and personal faith, towards a more 'catholic' or sacramental position. This may be through a sincere desire to be inclusive (and including children sounds very attractive) but the theological implications of such a move should not be missed.