

UNITED METHODIST PERSPECTIVES ON BAPTISM

A Series of Three Papers

Editor's Introduction

The General Conference Baptism Study Committee has prepared an 8,600-word statement on baptism that will be offered to United Methodism for four years of study.

The intention of the group is to allow a quadrennium of discussion at all levels of the issues raised in the study before submitting a report for adoption, with appropriate Book of Discipline changes, at a future General Conference.

The document is entitled "By Water and the Spirit -- a United Methodist Understanding of Baptism." An introduction asserts that "contemporary United Methodism needs to recover and reformulate its understanding of baptism."

The United Methodist Church is currently unique among major denominations in its use and affirmation of both infant and believer's baptism. The Study Committee's paper reaffirms that position and continues to allow for administration of the sacrament by sprinkling, pouring or immersion. While rebaptism is rejected, "appropriate" reaffirmation of baptismal vows at any point is endorsed.

The traditional Methodist views on baptism are well-documented and, in general, have sparked little controversy in the 200-plus year history of the denomination. While infant baptism has predominated in later years, the baptismal records of former Methodist Episcopal churches within the Central Pennsylvania Conference indicate the use of all three allowable forms -- and not infrequently during the same time period and on the same charge.

Pastoral records reflect the same diversity. On July 31, 1910, Rev. Benjamin Hilbish baptized six adults -- five by sprinkling and one by pouring. On August 29, 1915, he baptized two adults in the Burning Bush Church (Altoona District) by sprinkling and three adults "near Burning Bush" by immersion. Nor did Methodist immersions have to take place outside the church; page 22 of the 1891 minutes of the Central New York Conference, which then included part of Pennsylvania, records "A novelty in Methodism, in the form of a baptistery, has been placed in the church at Canton [Wellsboro District], at a cost of \$40.00."

The 1968 merger with the Evangelical United Brethren Church brought to United Methodism distinct

perspectives on baptism. It is awareness and understanding of these points of view that the following three papers address. Each of the papers was originally prepared in some other context and has been minimally edited to appear in THE CHRONICLE.

In the first paper, Earl Kauffman writes of the Anabaptist influence on the United Brethren Church. The Anabaptists are often considered the radical wing of the Reformation. Although peaceable people who never refused to help a neighbor, whether friend or enemy, their insistence on believer's baptism (which generally meant rebaptism) was seen as a rejection of church authority and their refusal to bear arms was seen as a rejection of state authority. Consequently they were considered a threat, consistently hated, and even martyred by Protestant, Catholic and civil authorities. They generally promoted plain lifestyle, free from worldly dress and influence, and are most visibly present today in the Amish and Mennonite churches.

Many early United Brethren people and leaders came from the Mennonite Church. One may gain a reasonable impression of the early UB Church by examining the United Christian Church -- a small denomination, existing mostly in Lebanon County, that broke away from the United Brethren in the 1860's because of trends toward infant baptism, wedding rings and fancy apparel, and the denomination's failure to take a strong peace stance during the Civil War. Though not nearly so severe as Amish or Mennonites, the United Christian Church maintains these and other distinctives to this day. In addition, one may examine the United Brethren in Christ (Old Constitution) -- a group with headquarters in Huntingdon, Indiana, and many churches in the Franklin County area of our Conference, that broke away from the United Brethren in 1889 when the denomination adopted a new constitution that moved it further from its Mennonite roots.

Rev. Kauffman speaks from first-hand experience. He was raised in Lititz, Lancaster County, and pastored several charges in eastern Pennsylvania before becoming a member of the Central Pennsylvania Conference.

The second paper, written by Eugene Snyder, examines the doctrine and practice of baptism in all the original branches of the Evangelical United Brethren Church, as well as in the post-1946 EUB denomination. Rev. Snyder was originally ordained in 1949 at Philadelphia's historic Old St. George's Methodist Church. He became a member of the Central Pennsylvania Conference of the EUB Church, with Red Lion St. Paul's considered his home congregation, in

1954. In 1962, partly because of perceived difficulties with the appointment system (which both the EUB's and Methodists used before the 1968 merger and continue to use as a distinctive of the United Methodist Church), Rev. Snyder transferred his pastoral credentials to the Evangelical and Reformed Church (now, through merger, the United Church of Christ) and currently pastors a UCC church west of Philadelphia.

Martin Schrag, the author of the third paper, is an ordained member of the Brethren in Christ Church -- a denomination both Anabaptist and Pietistic that began in Lancaster County from Mennonite roots during the same prolonged period of revival among the Pennsylvania Germans that gave birth to the United Brethren Church.

Because the early United Brethren failed to keep official membership lists (they preferred to let that to the Lord), it is unclear whether the Brethren in Christ founders were ever a part of Otterbein's and Boehm's organization. At any rate, they represent the more conservative branch of that revival and provide a picture of what the United Brethren might have become had the Mennonite Boehm not been so ecumenically minded with the Reformed Otterbein.

While modern-day Brethren in Christ dress and worship much like United Methodists, two smaller denominations that broke from the main body in the mid-1800's have kept more outward signs of their common origins. The United Zion Church maintains plainer dress, including the prayer covering for women, and less liturgical worship services. The denomination, which was started in Dauphin County and used to include congregations in Franklin County, now exists only within the boundaries of the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference. The Old Order River Brethren dress in an extremely plain manner, much like the Amish, and worship in homes and barns rather than church buildings. Most of the denomination's members are found in Lancaster and Franklin Counties.

Dr. Schrag's paper argues in favor of believer's baptism, but the point is not merely that people should be baptized as adults instead of as infants. THE CHRONICLE presents the paper because it addresses the true meaning and importance of baptism in the Anabaptist tradition from which the United Brethren arose. Baptism is not an isolated event; it cannot be separated from one's personal salvation, commitment to Christ, and commitment to the body of believers. These, I believe, are some of the very issues the General Conference Baptism Study Committee seeks to address and seeks to have United Methodists discuss during the next quadrennium.