THE FREE METHODIST pastor

Summer 1983

PARENTS DEDICATE, THE CHURCH BAPTIZES

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I have in my possession *The Discipline of the Free Methodist Church*, 1874, fourteen years after the founding of our denomination. Article XVIII of the Articles of Religion includes the following constitutional guarantee: "The baptism of young children is to be retained in the Church." From the beginning until 1974 this statement on the baptism of our children was the position of the denomination.

In 1974 a new Constitution was adopted by the General Conference and ratified by the annual conferences. The new Constitution gave a more complete explanation of our historic position. In regard to baptism as a sacrament, Article XVII states, "We believe water baptism and the Lord's Supper are the sacraments of the church commanded by Christ. They are means of grace through faith, tokens of our profession of Christian faith, and signs of God's gracious ministry toward us. By them, he works within us to quicken, strengthen, and confirm our faith."

Regarding the baptism of young children, the Article XVII affirms: "Baptism is a symbol of the new covenant, and since infants are recognized as being included in the atonement, we hold that they may be baptized upon request of parents or guardians who shall give assurance for them of necessary Christian training. They shall be required to affirm the vow for themselves before being accepted into church membership."

Accordingly, the bishops have made it very clear to pastors that we ministers violate our vows of ordination in the Free Methodist Church if we refuse to administer baptism of infants or children upon request of parents or guardians. This is the historic position of the church.

Wesley's View

The founders of Free Methodism who felt called to "return to early Methodism" were in agreement with Wesley in this position on baptism.

In his *Works*, Wesley has given us "A Treatixe on Baptism" in which he wrote: "By baptism we enter into covenant with God; into that everlasting covenant, which he hath commanded forever, that new covenant, which he promised to make with the spiritual Israel . . . And as circumcision was then the way of entering into this covenant, so baptism is now. . . .

"Therefore, it is not only lawful and innocent, but meet, right, and our bounden duty, in conformity to the uninterrupted practice of the whole Church of Christ from the earliest ages, to consecrate our children to God by baptism, as the Jewish Church was commanded to do by circumcision." (See Burtner and Chiles, *A Compend of Wesley Theology*, Abingdon Press, New York and Nashville, 1944, pages 266-268.)

Inferences from the Scriptures

We must not forget that the Church of Jesus Christ from its beginning, was and is now a covenant church even as Israel was a covenant nation. In Jeremiah's promise of "a new covenant" the prophet announces, "Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah" (31:31). The author of Hebrews identifies this new covenant with Jesus. He declares: "Jesus is the mediator of the new covenant" (Hebrews 12:24).

There is no dispute of the fact that circumci-

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sion was, and is now, the sign of the covenant relationship between God and Israel. The proselyte who comes into Judaism as an adult must be circumcised. But those born into Judaism are circumcised on the eighth day after birth. The rite is the acknowledgment of the ancient covenant by all faithful Jews.

In the New Testament the records we have of the conversion and baptism of families imply strongly the inclusion of children. Peter declared: "The promise is unto you, and to your children" (Acts 2:39). He did not qualify "children" with the adjective "adult." That seemed unnecessary, for the early Fathers were steeped in the tradition of family unity in all matters of religion.

When Paul and Silas were released from the Philippian jail, we read: "And he (the jailer) took them the same hour of the night and washed their stripes; and was baptized, he and all his, straightway" (Acts 16:33). Family life being what it was in that day, we should expect a specific exception of "infants and young children" if Paul had been disposed to reject children from the sacrament.

The classical statement of our baptismal ritual regarding the church's acceptance of children in baptism can be found in the words of Jesus. We read: "And they brought young children to him (Christ), that he should bless them; and his disciples rebuked those that brought them. But when Jesus saw it, he was displeased, and said unto them, 'Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not; for of such is the kingdom of God' " (Mark 10:13-14).

A Methodist Scholar Speaks

Speaking of the church's responsibility to accept into its fellowship all for whom Christ died when they themselves cannot make a choice, Olin Alfred Curtis says: "The church of our Lord has the right and the duty to claim the helpless. She should take into her atmosphere and association and (if possible) service all people who are unable to make a choice for themselves; not only all irresponsible children, but all the feebleminded, and all those unfortunate souls who have been mentally wrecked by woes too terrible for human fortitude." He speaks of this group as members "by Christian claim."

Curtis (who was required reading when I was a student minister) continues: "If you ask what infant baptism precisely stands for as a rite, the answer should, I believe, be this: It stands for the sacramental acceptance by the church of the consecration unto Christ of a babe by a home." (See Olin Alfred Curtis, *The Christian Faith*, Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1956, pages 420-421, 438.)

A Presbyterian Scholar Speaks

"Must a child be outside the church? Does not Baptism rather say that from earliest infancy I am brought into the environment of grace and receive the seal of God's love? Of course an infant does not feel any effect. But who is to say how soon a child becomes aware of love, and why not divine love?

"What shall the church say to its children? Shall it forbid them Baptism? Shall it assume that there is no such thing as a Christian child? Are children outsiders in the church or are they members of the household of faith? If the old Israel included its children in the family of faith through circumcision, shall the new Israel exclude them?" (See John Frederick Jansen, *The Meaning of Baptism*, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1948, pages 102, 108.)

Some Personal Observations

1. We make no claim that baptism is a sacrament that regenerates either the adult believer or a child. For the adult believer baptism is a sign of the covenant of grace entered into by faith, a public confession of the believer that he trusts in the atoning work of Christ for his salvation and a means of grace. For the infant baptism is a sign of the covenant of grace also, and a confession of the parents and the church that our children are saved, not because they are innocent, but (as all are) because of the universal atonement made by Christ for the race. I believe, also, and strongly, that baptism is a means of grace to the child. Do we not pray for our children? Do we not anoint them with oil for their healing? Should we think of grace as being given only to that person who is adult and sufficiently rational to understand the sacrifice made by Jesus Christ? If so, who then

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may be baptized? Who understands this fully?

2. The dedication of a child is made by the only ones who can give the child to God, the parents. The church, in baptism, accepts the child in a formal but spiritual manner and pledges to confirm that child, in cooperation with the parents, in the Christian faith. It is meaningless for the church to assume it can dedicate that child which it has not accepted into the family of God.

3. Until comparatively recent years the Free Methodist Church has stood in the classical catholic tradition of the several historic branches of Christendom in the baptism of its children. The Roman Catholic, the Eastern Orthodox, the Episcopal, the Reformed, the Presbyterian, the Methodist, and other churches from Catholic, Calvinian, Arminian, and Wesleyan traditions have agreed on the baptism of children as a valid sacrament of the Church of Jesus Christ. Today we are being influenced to our loss by the Baptistic branches of the church, including the Churches of Christ.

4. In my opinion, those pastors of the Free Methodist Church who persuade our members to let the church "dedicate" their children rather than baptize are turning away from the intention of our founding fathers, failing to transmit the letter and the spirit of our Articles of Religion, and missing a great opportunity to witness to the covenant character of the church.

5. Which brings me to say, I believe that the New Testament church was not *merely* "a believer's church," as some would have us believe. It was, and continues to be, a covenant church which does indeed bring into its fellowship believing adults, as Judaism has always done, but which includes also the whole Christian family until (if that should happen) a growing child turns away from that fellowship in unbelief, even as an adult may do.

6. With this concept, the nurture of our children is of supreme importance. We believe that the confession of Christ as Saviour by a child of even four and five years of age, if not younger, is valid. We therefore have a solemn responsibility to confirm our children in the Christian faith, to guide them in Christian love, and to bring them to an adult experience of Christ by the revelation of the Holy Spirit. The vows of adult baptism and membership can be made meaningful to a child who is assured that the church has accepted him from his infancy into the loving family of God.

THE PASTOR AND HIS PERSONAL FINANCE

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Getting ahead or even keeping apace is no small accomplishment in today's economy. Here are some techniques I have learned which brighten the financial picture for me:

1. Begin by giving at least 10% to the Lord.

Preachers sometimes take this position, "I'm living on a smaller salary which more than offsets any tithe I would otherwise pay, hence I do not need to tithe," or "Others can give generously and the Lord blesses them for so doing, but the preacher is not in a type of business the Lord can bless financially." Either of the above attitudes will defeat us spiritually and shut the windows of heaven for blessings God would like to bestow. It is difficult for me to feature God blessing the ministry of a preacher who doesn't at least tithe and I believe God wants us to go far beyond tithing and give offerings also.

2. After paying at least the tithe and appropriate taxes, set aside 10% of the remaining income for savings. (Saving, not spending!)

Set it aside in a tax deferred annuity (not counted towards income tax or self-employment tax) to be used in retirement. Don't depend solely on Social Security and the Church Pension Plan.

One thousand dollars in a tax deferred annuity is a major tax savings. For instance, if you are in the 16% tax bracket, a $1,000 T.D.A. will save you $160 income tax. It will also save $93.50 (.0935%) in self-employment tax—and $20 (2%) state income tax. (This may vary from state to state.) Add it up and you have saved $273.50 taxes. Or, look at it this way, if you keep the $1,000 for yourself, pay $273.50 taxes, you net only $726.50, but in a T.D.A. the $726.50 will earn $273.50, plus interest paid. By adding $80.00 interest collected during the first year, the investment of $726.50 has earned $353.50, 48% earning power. Not bad! Where else can you invest money and receive 48% return?

3. Pay all taxes due Uncle Sam, but not a penny more. Tips on cutting taxes include in addition to item No. 2:

a. Have your church designate a portion of your income as "housing allowance." Whether you are buying your own home or live in a par-