METHODISM AND THE RECENTLY REVISED BAPTISMAL LITURGY

LAURENCE W. WOOD

In 1982, the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches met at Lima, Peru, and reached what has been called "a massive ecumenical consensus...concerning the forms and content of Christian liturgy in the Roman Catholic and Reformation churches as a result of the impact of the modern liturgical movement."¹ The details of this consensus are explained in its official publication, *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, which is known as the Lima text.²

As a Wesleyan theologian, I would like to respond to its proposal that the baptismal liturgy should include more than just water baptism, symbolizing Jesus' death/resurrection. Rather, the "full meaning"³ of Christian baptism also entails "the pentecostal gift of the Holy Spirit" symbolized through the laying on of hands and/or chrismation.⁴ This pentecostal addition to the baptismal liturgy has special significance for the doctrine of holiness within the Wesleyan tradition. In his sermon on "Christian Perfection," John Wesley said it was on the day of Pentecost when "first it was" in the entire history of salvation that full sanctification became a possibility.⁵ John Fletcher, Wesley's designated successor and apologist, more fully developed this theme, highlighting that full sanctifying grace became a possibility because of the baptism with the Holy Spirit who was poured out upon the Church on the day of Pentecost. The Wesleyan tradition, however, had no ritual basis for its idea of full sanctification—until now. This is the idea that I would like to explore in this paper.

THE APOSTOLIC TRADITION OF HIPPOLYTUS

First, let me say something briefly about the 3rd century document, *The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus*, which is "one of the earliest liturgical manuals in existence"⁶ and "the most important document on the life and practice of the early Church."⁷ Gregory Dix, who had considerable influence in the modern liturgical renewal

¹ Dr. Laurence W. Wood, Frank Paul Morris Professor of Systematic Theology, Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Ky.

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movement, believed this ancient Church order document showed that the primitive Christian Church incorporated gestures of water baptism and the laying on of hands as the larger meaning of Christian baptism. This distinction supposedly served as the basis for the rite of confirmation subsequent to water baptism that developed in the West in the 4th and 5th centuries. The text described new believers moving inside the church building immediately following the act of water baptism, where the bishop laid hands on them and offered them the Holy Spirit: Here are the words of the text: “And the bishop, laying his hand on them invokes, saying: ‘Lord God, you have made them worthy to deserve the remission of sins through the laver of regeneration; make them worthy to be filled with the Holy Spirit, send your grace upon them that they may serve you in accordance with your will.’” Dix interpreted this passage to mean that invoking the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands constituted a second moment following baptism with water. Together these two events—water baptism and the laying on of hands—formed the larger meaning of Christian baptism.

Another source used in the modern liturgical movement for trying to understand the primitive Church order is Jewish forms of worship because they influenced the development of early Christian practices. One Jewish ritual which may have been a precursor to the rite of Christian baptism was the practice of Jewish proselyte baptism, which included the two symbols of circumcision and water. The Jewish practice of baptism with water symbolized repentance and forgiveness, while circumcision symbolized the seal of the covenant with God’s people. Dix believed water baptism in the New Testament was the sacrament of Easter, while the laying on of hands was the ordinance of Pentecost, symbolizing the sealing of the Christian life, thus representing the New Testament counterpart to the Jewish practice of circumcision. This Jewish practice of a twofold rite of initiation—i.e. water baptism and circumcision—could be a background basis for interpreting water baptism and the infilling of the Spirit in The Apostolic Tradition of St. Hippolytus as the twofold meaning of Christian baptism.

Interestingly enough, John Fletcher, who was the first Methodist theologian, interpreted Jewish proselyte baptism precisely in this way. He pointed out the correlation between Jewish proselyte baptism and the New Testament view of baptism, noting that water baptism corresponded to the meaning of justifying faith while circumcision symbolized the meaning of Christian perfection.

**Pseudo-Macarius and Meaning of the Baptism with the Spirit**

The liturgy of Christian initiation, particularly the rite of confirmation, was a matter of considerable interest within the Anglican Church toward the end of the 19th century and first part of the 20th century before it became an issue in the larger ecumenical movement in the 1950’s. In 1891, A. J. Mason wrote a book on The Relation of Confirmation to Baptism. Then, in 1921, he published The Fifty Spiritual Homilies of St. Macarius the Egyptian. These homilies were written around 380 A.D., and they defined the seal of the Spirit as a subsequent moment beyond water baptism. It is not known for sure who this Macarius was, but Patristic scholars have shown he was not the Egyptian desert Father, but rather he lived in and around Syria and had a close friendship with the greatest of the early church fathers, Gregory of Nyssa. Mason called attention to the non-sacramental nature of the
preaching of Pseudo-Macarius, and he pointed out that his preaching was not a call to membership in the organizational structure of the church or to a participation in its sacraments and ordinances. Rather, he called his hearers to receive in a personal way "the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost." These homilies were important, however, in the Anglican liturgical movement because it indicated that pseudo-Macarius appealed to his fellow monks to appropriate the meaning of confirmation in a personalized way.

These homilies were translated into English in 1721 under the title of Primitive Morality, or The Spiritual Homilies of St. Macarius the Egyptian. John Wesley translated some of these homilies, and John Fletcher drew heavily from them and quoted them as supporting Wesley's concept of Christian perfection. Methodist preachers in the 19th century referred to Pseudo-Macarius as an early source of Methodist belief in freedom from sin through the baptism with the Spirit. Even a casual reading of these homilies will show why the early Methodists thought of Pseudo-Macarius in this way. For example, in his nineteenth homily, Pseudo-Macarius says that one is freed from indwelling sin through being filled with the Spirit. He writes: "The Lord... has mercy on him and frees him from... indwelling sin. He fills him with the Holy Spirit... Then he brings forth purely the fruits of the Spirit." He further writes: "The Spirit has perfected us in himself and he is perfected in us as we are purified from all defilement and stain of sin, as he presents us as beautiful brides, pure and spotless, to Christ." Pseudo-Macarius offered a theological explanation why he connected the baptism with the Spirit and "sanctifying perfection." The circumcision of the flesh under the Old Covenant was a prelude of the New Covenant idea of the circumcision of the Spirit, which symbolized purity of heart. He equated circumcision of heart, perfection, and the baptism with the Holy Spirit. In his forty seventh homily, he said: "They were made known to be people of God by circumcision; here, God's peculiar people receive the sign of circumcision inwardly in their heart. The heavenly knife cuts away the unwanted portion of the mind, which is the impure uncircumcision of sin. With them was a baptism sanctifying the flesh; with us, a baptism of Holy Ghost and fire, for this is what John preached; He shall baptize you with Holy Ghost and fire," Pseudo-Macarius also spoke of "the grace of the sanctifying perfection of the Spirit" (Homily 40) and receiving "the Spirit in full assurance" (Homily 20). These descriptive phrases are not isolated references, but typify his theology of the Spirit. Mason called the homilies of Pseudo-Macarius "a companion volume to the Imitation of Christ." We know that this classic by Thomas à Kempis greatly inspired Wesley, but so did the Fifty Homilies of Pseudo-Macarius, although we do not know to what extent. However, we know that John Fletcher drew heavily from Wesley's translated version. Responding to some of his critics who accused Wesley and Fletcher of creating the doctrine of entire sanctification, Fletcher writes: "From the preceding extract [of these homilies] I conclude, that, if Macarius, who lived near 1300 years ago, so clear preached the baptism and dispensation of the Holy Spirit, Mr. John Wesley and I cannot reasonably be charged with novelty for doing the same thing."  

**JOHN WESLEY'S SILENCE ON THE RITE OF CONFIRMATION**

Like his father, John Wesley apparently did not think confirmation was an important
rite. Wesley was confirmed along with over 800 people at the same time when the bishop came to Epworth on July 15, 1712. The fact is that Wesley largely ignored the rite of confirmation, although on one occasion he claimed to observe all the rites of Anglicanism, including confirmation. Without objecting to the rite of confirmation itself, Wesley criticized the excessive ceremonialism of Roman Catholicism. However, in 1784 when Wesley prepared The Sunday Service for American Methodism, Wesley simply omitted the rite of confirmation from The Sunday Service without any explanation. This omission shows that Wesley at best considered the rite irrelevant.

JOHN FLETCHER'S DEFENSE OF CONFIRMATION

Considering the enormous influence of John Fletcher in early Methodism, it is surprising that his views on confirmation were ignored by those who otherwise espoused his writings as the right interpretation of Wesley's theology. Perhaps this can be explained because American Methodists did not have a rite of confirmation as a result of Wesley's deleting it from The Sunday Service. On the other hand, as an "Evangelical High Churchman," Fletcher interpreted the rite of confirmation as a means of grace. He said "it was a custom of the Apostles and elders in the primitive Church, adopted by our own church of England, to pray that young Believers might be filled with the Spirit through the laying on of hands." Fletcher referred to the laying on of hands on the believers, who apply for confirmation: A solemn gesture, which Peter, John, and Paul used, when they confirmed the believers of Samaria and Ephesus, who, tho' they had been baptized, had not yet received the abundant measure of the Spirit, which was bestowed on the disciples at the day of Pentecost." Fletcher draws from the homilies of the Church of England to argue that the purpose of confirmation was to fully sanctify baptized believers "in his sudden, Pentecostal way."

In a letter to Wesley (August 1, 1775), Fletcher offered some proposals suggesting ways in which Methodism could function as "a general society" within the Church of England. Among other issues, Fletcher proposed that Wesley reformulate the articles of religion and revise the Book of Common Prayer, which Wesley later did in The Sunday Service designed for the American Methodists. Fletcher also proposed that Wesley seek permission from the archbishop to perform confirmation upon Methodists, but Wesley ignored this suggestion. The consequence is that Methodism did not have a liturgical rite of the doctrine of full sanctification.

JEREMY TAYLOR (1613-67) AND THE PREVAILING VIEW OF CONFIRMATION IN THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

Fletcher had good reasons for connecting confirmation and Christian perfection because they were rooted in the prevailing theology of confirmation in his day. The theology of confirmation had been defended and explained by Jeremy Taylor. His book, Holy Living and Holy Dying, had been a decisive influence in Wesley's quest for perfection, but it is not known if Wesley had read Taylor's treatise, A Discourse of Confirmation. This work emphasized the theme of "sanctification and power." It was based on Paul's question to the Ephesian believers in Acts 19:2, "Have you received the Holy Ghost since you believed?"
In explaining the necessity for the rite of confirmation, Taylor argued for a distinction between water baptism and "the baptism with the Spirit," citing Scripture and the theology of the early church fathers as the basis of his views. He particularly used "seal of the Spirit" and "baptism of the Holy Ghost" to refer to the sanctification of believers subsequent to their baptism with water. The goal of confirmation is to make "perfect Christians," but those who have not received the baptism with the Spirit are but "babes in Christ." He noted that the Samaritans became Christians at their water baptism (Acts 8), but until they received the Spirit through the imposition of hands, they lacked "a something, something to make them perfect." This perfection is defined as sanctification: "The baptism of water profits us, because it washes away the sins we have formerly committed, if we repent of them; but it does not sanctify the soul."

An examination of the theology of confirmation in the writings of Jeremy Taylor shows that the concept of perfection was deeply embedded in the intellectual background of Anglican liturgy and theology in Wesley's day. It also shows that the specific phrase, "baptism with the Spirit," was linked to full sanctifying grace. The connection between full sanctification and confirmation can be seen in the following prayer for confirmands in The Book of Common Prayer (1662), which was used in Wesley's day: "Confirm and settle the godly Resolutions They have now made. Sanctify Them throughout litalics minel that They may become the Temples of the Holy Ghost." It is thus understandable that Fletcher believed Wesley's theology of Christian perfection was an evangelical appropriation of the meaning of confirmation.

**NATHAN BANGS**

Nathan Bangs was the first American Methodist theologian. He often spoke of Christian perfection as being accomplished by the baptism with the Spirit. His History of the Methodist Episcopal Church showed this was already a theme in early American Methodism in the late 1790s. Significantly enough, Bangs believed that the larger meaning of baptism included both water baptism and the laying on of hands. His book is a carefully researched study on ecclesiology, entitled, An Original Church of Christ; or, A Scriptural Vindication of the Orders and Powers of the Ministry of the Methodist Episcopal Church, published in 1837.

The occasion for this study was an incident that occurred in 1804, when a minister of the Church of England debated with Bangs in a private conversation concerning the validity of his ordination. This minister specifically asked Bangs why Thomas Coke asked the house of bishops of the Episcopal Church to ordain him if he thought Methodist ordinations were valid. This caught Bangs off guard, not knowing that Coke had done such a thing. He conferred with Francis Asbury, who regretfully confirmed that Coke on his own had indeed done this. This was a first incident in a series of disputes between American Methodists and Episcopalians over the validity of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Beginning in 1809, Bangs began a theological investigation into this issue, and in 1820, he published a short volume on A Vindication of Methodist Episcopacy. Over the next 17 years, he wrote a series of articles for The Christian Advocate and Journal in defense of the validity of the Methodist Episcopal Church, which were subsequently published in 1837 at the request of several annual conferences.
Bangs' intent was to show that the Episcopal Church was not following the original church of Christ because it separated confirmation from water baptism. He argued that the rite of the laying on of hands should be included within the larger meaning of Christian baptism and that it was "uns scriptural" to withhold this part of baptism until a much later time. He maintained that baptism was only 'half performed' without the laying on of hands signifying the bestowal of the Spirit. He believed the laying on of hands was practiced during the first three hundred years of Church history, beginning in the Book of Acts, noting that it was considered as an essential appendage of the baptismal rite, so much so that the latter was considered incomplete without it.

Although Bangs agreed with Wesley's decision to eliminate confirmation as a rite separated from baptism, he argued that it should be a part of the baptismal liturgy itself. In spite of the fact that Bangs was American Methodism's first theologian, his understanding of the two gestures of water baptism and the laying on of hands never became a part of Methodist liturgy until 1976.

**The United Methodist Official Response to the Lima Text**

The reforms recommended by the Faith and Order Division of the WCC made their way into the rite of initiation of the United Methodist Church in 1976 with the publication of *A Service of Baptism, Confirmation, and Renewal*. Its baptismal liturgy now included both the act of water baptism itself (signifying Jesus' death resurrection) and the laying on of hands (signifying the descent of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost).

The United Methodist bishops in their response to the Lima Text noted that American Methodism had no rite of confirmation from its beginning, and that "the very word itself came into our usage fairly recently but without definition." They remained uncertain about its meaning. At the same time, the bishops noted with regret that its baptismal liturgy made no mention "of the giving of the Holy Spirit in baptism, or confirmation."

**A Theological Proposal**

My conviction is that Fletcher's interpretation of the Anglican rite of confirmation is the place for Wesleyans to begin their reflection on the significance of referencing the pentecostal gift of the Spirit in the new baptismal liturgy. Special attention should be given to Fletcher's *Last Check to Antinomianism*. John Wesley edited, corrected, published, and promoted this work. When it was still in manuscript form, Wesley asked Fletcher to revise it so that it would affirm that babes in Christ also receive the Holy Spirit. After Fletcher made this revision, Wesley noted in a follow-up letter that there was now no disagreement between them. The thesis of Fletcher's *Last Check* was that the ability to love God with all one's heart, mind, and soul was made possible through the baptism with the Holy Spirit who was poured out upon the Church on the day of Pentecost. Fletcher also argued in this work that confirmation is the liturgical rite and ordinance of Christian perfection. Although Methodism never had a rite of confirmation until recent years, it has always had a theology appropriate to it. The modern liturgical renewal movement has thus bequeathed to the Wesleyan tradition a baptismal liturgy exactly fitted for its theology.

**Notes**

1. Frank C. Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress
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3. Ibid., p. 6.

4. Ibid., p. 6.

5. Outler, Sermons, 2:110. "On Christian Perfection". Wesley writes: "But the Holy Ghost was not yet given in his sanctifying graces, as he was after Jesus was glorified... And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, then first it was [italics mine], that they who 'waited for the promise of the Father' were made more than conquerors over sin in a common phrase for Christian perfection! by the Holy Ghost given unto them... That this great salvation from sin is another common phrase for Christian perfection was not given till Jesus was glorified, St. Peter also plainly testifies." Harald Lindström likewise points out that Wesley is here talking about "the sanctifying grace of the Holy Spirit... in full measure." Cf. Harald Lindström, Wesley and Sanctification (Wilmore, KY: Francis Asbury Publishing Company, 1980), p. 135.


7. Senn, p. 77.

8. Bradshaw, p. 81.

9. This is the major focus of his book, The Theology of Confirmation in Relation to Baptism.


11. Stewart-Sykes, p. 112.

12. Cf. Stewart-Sykes, pp. 122-123. More recent scholars are not so sure that this text proves a subsequent act of bestowing the Spirit as a part of the larger meaning of baptism, which then could have developed into a separate rite of confirmation. Stewart-Sykes, p. 123. The text only exhorts newly baptized believers to expect at some future time the infilling of the Spirit rather than being a specific invocation of the Spirit upon the candidates in the baptismal liturgy itself. As Sykes shows, this "is a prayer that the candidates may merit being filled with the Spirit at a later point, perhaps in their reception of the eucharistic gifts, but more probably in the subsequent Episcopal function." Ibid., p. 123.


15. John Fletcher, "The Doctrine of the New Birth, as it is stated in these sheets, is directly or indirectly maintained by the most spiritual divines, especially in their sacred poems." An unpublished essay written in late 1775 or early 1776 by John Fletcher in his own handwriting, circulated.
among Fletcher’s friends (especially Mary Bosanquet and Thomas Coke), and overlooked by subsequent historians (including Luke Tyerman and J. F. Hurst), which I located, March 1997, in a box of miscellaneous materials written by Fletcher. This essay is contained in the Fletcher-Tooth Archival Collection as part of the Methodist Archives in the John Rylands Library of Manchester University, England, and it is now published in The Asbury Theological Journal 50.1 (Spring, 1998):35-36. Cited hereafter as New Birth.

19. Ibid., pp. xxii-xxiii.
24. Ibid., p. 149.
27. New Birth, p. 42.
29. Ibid.
32. Fletcher, New Birth, p. 60.
33. Ibid., p. 54.
37. Ibid., 5:609-669.
38. Ibid., 5:619ff.
39. Ibid., 5:638, 656, 658.
40. Ibid., 5:624, 633.
41. Ibid., 5:657, 660.
42. Ibid., 5:654.
43. Ibid., 5:616.
44. Ibid., 5:629.
45. Ibid., 5:622.
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51. Ibid.

52. Ibid., pp. 4-5.

53. Ibid., p. 13.

54. Ibid., pp. 322, 325.

55. Ibid., p. 320


58. Telford, *Letters*, 6:146, (to John Fletcher, March 22, 1775). Wesley wrote: “It seems our views of Christian Perfection are a little different, though not opposite. It is certain every babe in Christ has received the Holy Ghost, and the Spirit witnesses with his spirit that he is a child of God. [Notice here that Wesley links “received the Holy Ghost” and “the Spirit witnesses with his spirit.”]. But he has not obtained Christian perfection.”

59. Telford, *Letters*, 6:174-175, (to John Fletcher, August 18, 1775). Wesley wrote: “I have now received all your papers, and here and there made some small corrections.” He then said: “I do not perceive that you have granted too much [to babes in Christ by allowing that they too have received the Spirit], or that there is any difference between us.”