

# TANULMÁNYOK

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## Baptism in Ecumenical Dialogue: Some Observations

### ÖSSZEFOGLALÁS

*A Hit és Egyházszervezet által kibocsátott Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry (Kereszttség, úrvacsora és szolgálat – Lima, 1982) nevezetű dokumentum fontos állomást jelentett a keresztység kölcsönös megértésének és elismerésének felekezeti közötti horizontján, az utóbbi évtizedekben azonban újabb kérdések és alternatív válaszadási kísérletek láttak napvilágot. Jelen tanulmány a legutóbbi One Baptism (Egy keresztység, 2008) nevezetű dokumentumot veszi vizsgálat alá, és különösen is az iránt érdeklődik, hogy a dokumentum miként beszél a keresztység kontextusában a hitfejlődésről, gyermek- és felnőttkeresztsegről, és a közösségbe való betagozódásról. A szerző vizsgálódásait saját egyházának gyakorlatára vetíti, és az egyházzsabályzatok revidálásának kérdésével is foglalkozik, melynek kapcsán a következő javaslatokkal él: a gyermek- és felnőttkeresztység az egyházi gyakorlatban egyaránt legitim státuszt élvezzen; a gyermekek keresztység nélküli megáldásának alternatív gyakorlata általánosabb elismerést kapjon. Szorgalmazza a nyilvános hitvallás helyének újragondolását az egyházban, továbbá egy olyan alternatív ritus bevezetését támogatja, amely lehetőséget teremt a gyermekkorban megkeresztelt egyháztagok számára, hogy keresztiségüket felnőttként is megtapasztalhassák. A szerző véleménye szerint egy „keresztységközpontú ekklézológia” az ökumenikus kapcsolatok fejlődését is előmozdítaná.*

### Introduction

I feel privileged to have been an appointed member of the Faith and Order Plenary Commission since 2007. As you may know, this Commission is the broadest international theological forum within the ecumenical movement, created in Lausanne in 1927, and one of the two constitutive movements in the founding of the World Council of Churches.

Currently three major study projects are on the agenda of F&O: (a) The Nature and Mission of the Church, (b) Moral Discernment in the Churches, and (c) Sources of Authority.

Part of the first project of the Commission is the issue of baptism, which seems to show a renewed urgency in present-day ecumenical life. However, baptism has been on the F&O agenda for decades.

To understand the importance of this issue, let me give you a quote from the F&O-webpage. Here baptism is characterized as a 'boundary issue', i.e. an issue

that needs to be addressed before churches can move towards communion, beyond their own boundaries. I quote:

*Baptism into the death and rising of Christ is baptism into a reality which is both particular and universal. And yet the churches have found it difficult to appropriate the recognition of each others' baptism. Old tensions still exist between those who baptize on the basis of a personal confession of faith, and those who baptize infants; between those who see baptism as a once-off event, and those who see it as typical of the whole of the Christian life.*

*In recent work, it has been felt useful to not only explore the theology of baptism, but also to examine the liturgical services of the different churches to elicit what in effect each church does in practice, what meaning is attached to it, and how far baptism becomes the basis for ministry and for sharing in the community meal, and the recognition of ecclesial communities".<sup>1</sup>*

The *BEM-reports*<sup>2</sup> (*Baptism – Eucharist – Ministry*) until now by far the most well-known, translated and printed ecumenical report, mark an important stage in this process of mutual understanding and recognition of baptism. They seemed to witness to a major degree of consensus, and they actually have resulted in a range of new practical steps.<sup>3</sup> However, new questions and new approaches towards responses to those questions have been presented over the last decades.

F&O itself took the issue up again as a consequence of its 1993 Fifth World Conference in Santiago de Compostela (Spain). Stimulated not least by the experience of worship at this world conference, Faith and Order has turned anew to the issue of baptism in the context of the study of worship, as an essential part of its work for the unity of the church. The mutual recognition of baptism has been at the heart of this process. The conference recommended that Faith and Order “put in process for consideration by the churches a way for the mutual recognition of baptism”<sup>4</sup>

In a series of thematic consultations and F&O Standing Commission meetings new aspects of baptism were developed. Among them:

- the *ordo* (basic patterns or structures) of Christian life and worship; including the notion of the broader “*ordo* of baptism” as a life-long process of growth, within the Christian community, into Christ;
- different understandings of sacrament and/or ‘ordination’ as central to the differences among the churches in their understanding and practice of baptism;
- the churches’ current liturgical practice related to baptism;
- the churches’ current pre- and post-baptismal practice of catechism and Christian formation.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/who-are-we/organization-structure/consultative-bodies/faith-and-order/fields-of-study.html> (2 December, 2009)

<sup>2</sup> *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Faith and Order Paper No. 111), Geneva 1982 (=BEM)

<sup>3</sup> Cf. EEl, para 25–29 (see below, footnote 6).

<sup>4</sup> *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia: Official Report of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order, Santiago de Compostela, 1993*: Faith and Order Paper No. 166, Geneva, WCC, 1994, p. 252. Cf. for a detailed historical overview of the process between 1993 and 2006: OB (see footnote 5), Appendix II.

It is especially the first issue – the ‘ordo of baptism’ – that I want to deal with more extensively here, since this issue was at the heart of a specific study process, organized through a series of consultations and reports.

An important result of this process was the text *One Baptism: Towards Mutual Recognition of Christian Initiation* (from here: *One Baptism*, OB) as discussed by the F&O Standing Commission in 2006. However, the F&O Standing Commission has not formally adopted OB.<sup>5</sup>

Formally apart from that but in fact closely related, an important report was also issued by the Joint Working Group between the RCC and the WCC, on the *Eccelesiological and Ecumenical Implications of a Common Baptism*.<sup>6</sup> This study was presented to the WCC Assembly of Porto Alegre 2006, as an Appendix to the 8th report of the JWG. I will come back to it shortly at the end of this presentation.

### The Report *One Baptism: Towards Mutual Recognition of Christian Initiation*

As the title of the F&O document already indicates, the objective of this report is to contribute to a process of mutual recognition of baptism. As BEM already said, “our one baptism into Christ constitutes a call to the churches to overcome their divisions and visibly manifest their fellowship”.<sup>7</sup> The text is offered in the hope that it will help the churches (a) to clarify the meaning of the mutual recognition of baptism and to put its implications fully into practice, and (b) to clarify issues which prevent such recognition.<sup>8</sup> The structure of *One Baptism* is presented in the box below.

<sup>5</sup> ‘One Baptism: Towards Mutual Recognition’ (= OB), in: *Minutes of the Standing Commission on Faith and Order Cairo 2008* (Faith and Order Paper No. 208), Geneva 2009, 72–101. See for the discussion: *Minutes*, 28–31. At the time of the Kampen conference I was not aware of this fact. From 7–14 October 2009 the Faith and Order Plenary Commission met in Chania (Crete, Greece) to supervise its work. However, no actions either way were taken with regard to this report, mainly because the Plenary Commission has no authority to take such decisions. The Standing Commission is expected to decide on further steps in 2010.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Eccelesiological and Ecumenical Implications of a Common Baptism’ (= EEI), Appendix C in: Joint Working Groups between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches, *Eighth Report 1999–2005*, Geneva-Rome 2005, 45–72 (from here: EEI). Also on: [www.oikoumene.org](http://www.oikoumene.org)

<sup>7</sup> BEM/B, para 6, vgl. 15

<sup>8</sup> cf. OB, para 4.

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Let me give you a short clarification.

In the Introduction the notion of recognition is being considered more in general terms.

Section II explores the symbolic dimensions of baptism, the terminology of ‘sacrament’ and ‘ordinance’.<sup>9</sup> The Reformed tradition – like most of the main traditions – is used to the term ‘sacrament’, but for instance quite some Baptists prefer the term ‘ordinance’, in order to underline that it basically is a testimony of a person who has come to believe. To overstate it a bit: whereas sacraments focus on what God has done and is doing, ordinances focus on what man does in response to what God did. Section II further deals with the relation of the event of baptism itself to the continuing, life-long process of growth into Christ.

<sup>9</sup> cf. EEI, para 21–24.

Section III reviews biblical imagery in relation to baptism, notes the function of baptism as the point of entry into the church, stressing the common dimensions of most churches' baptismal liturgies, explores the relation between baptism and the Eucharist, and raises issues about the relation of baptism to church membership.

Section IV addresses the questions of the believer's faith in relation to God's initiative and to the faith of the community, and offers some comments on the context and content of Christian formation.

Finally section V reviews these themes in close relation to the challenge now facing the churches, to deepen their mutual recognition of baptism and to put that recognition into more effective practice.

In the introductory section the term 'baptismal life' is introduced in order to present a very basic insight of this study: from the outset the event of baptism is not being dealt with as an 'event' in itself – which by the way might to a high degree correspond with the way many people nowadays see life anyhow, as a series of 'events'! –, but it is set within the larger pattern of Christian initiation: baptism is preceded by formation in faith and followed by an ongoing process of nurture within the Christian community, fostering a life-long process of growth into Christ. Central to the text is the attempt to place the event of baptism within that larger context, in the hope that this will offer new possibilities for churches to understand the baptismal theology and practice of others and thus foster greater mutual recognition.

Therefore I will not simply follow this text in its given structure, but I want first of all to focus on section II-C, on 'Baptism and life-long growing into Christ', in order to come to an assessment of the extent to which these thoughts could challenge and stimulate the historical churches – like the ones most of us belong to – to meet the questions raised by both ecumenical encounter with the RCC on the one hand and the growing movements of evangelical and Pentecostal communities on the other hand.

In a next step I will try and formulate some practical suggestions in the area of church policy which in my view result from these challenges.

Finally I will present some remarks regarding the issue of a broadening and deepening of the mutual recognition of baptism.

## Baptismal life

"Baptism is related not only to momentary experience, but to lifelong growth into Christ".<sup>10</sup> This statement from the BEM report on baptism has been a source of new ecumenical discussions on how to give baptism a place within this process of lifelong growth into Christ. *One Baptism* addresses this question in an interesting section. The report is aware of the fact that most churches tend to focus on the one-time, unrepeatable character of baptism, and sees this as an important aspect of ongoing misunderstandings within and between the churches.

<sup>10</sup> BEM/B, para. 9; see for what follows OB, para. 33–41.

Baptismal life basically consists of three elements: (a) formation in faith, (b) baptism in water, and (c) participation in the life of the community. They may be discerned in some form in the baptismal practices of most churches, irrespective of the question if a particular church has a practice of infant baptism, of believers baptism, or both. However, different Christian traditions do have specific and distinct views as to the order of these three elements. Let me follow the report in more detail:

- a) The first element of baptismal life mentioned – although not necessarily the first element in terms of a temporal order within baptismal life – is formation in faith: it includes preaching and teaching, possibly in a formal shape in catechesis, intended to lead to conversion, appropriation of the faith in heart and mind, and trust in the triune God. The faith as expressed by the community of the church, including the parents in the case of an infant who is baptized, must be professed later on by that person himself or herself. In some traditions this profession may include the form of a formal rite. Nevertheless, formation in faith is a life-long process and does not come to an end by an act of profession.
- b) The second element is the rite of baptism itself, administered in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It is interesting to see that the report identifies immersion or submersion in water as “the fullest imaging of death and rebirth to new life, although other uses of water (pouring or sprinkling) are attested in ancient Christian traditions, reflect other biblical images for the giving of life and the Spirit, and are authentic means of baptism”.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless there are quite different modes of baptism in use in different churches, including churches which affirm baptism without water, or which understand baptism as an event without material signs, or which do not explicitly use the Trinitarian formula.
- c) The third element is participation in the life of the community. Those baptized will be admitted to the Eucharist, and will take their place in the community of the church, and so will exercise the spiritual gifts with which they have been endowed for service in the church and the world.

So far, so good. But *One Baptism* lists many questions that arise as to the way these three elements of lifelong growth into Christ are mutually connected.

One aspect is the relation between baptism and the Eucharist, or Holy Supper (to use a term more common in our tradition).

Baptism has been seen in many churches as a condition to be admitted to Holy Supper. Therefore, the report – in line with BEM<sup>12</sup> – strongly recommends that the celebration of baptism should take place in the midst of the congregation gathered in worship, preferably between a word-service and a table-service. This would also allow members of the congregation a further opportunity to remember, and reaffirm, their own baptismal vows. The presence of the community at the baptism also expresses its involvement in the whole process of initiation, and its

<sup>11</sup> OB, para 36, b.

<sup>12</sup> cf. BEM/B, para 23.

responsibility for the continued growth in Christ of the newly baptized. It would be fruitful to explore further ways in which Christian commitment can be affirmed corporately, like a more frequent practice of re-affirming baptismal vows.

In this framework special attention is being given to the issue of “moments of affirmation of Christian commitment”,<sup>13</sup> like the practice of confirmation, understood as an affirmation of baptismal faith. Here different understandings and practices play a role. The main one is the difference between an act of anointing (the sacrament of confirmation in the catholic, orthodox and Anglican traditions) and confirmation as an act of mature public profession of faith expected of adolescents. If I am not mistaken, also the practices of the Reformed Church in Hungary and the Protestant Church in the Netherlands in this respect are different. Whereas the public profession of faith in the Netherlands usually is supposed to be given by young people from the age of at least 18 years, the Hungarian practice comes closer to the German use of ‘Konfirmation’ at the age of 13 or 14 years.

*One Baptism* points to the complicated and sometimes confusing discussions within the churches on this issue. For instance, there are – sometimes within one church! – on the one hand tendencies to restore the original close temporal link between baptism and confirmation, while on the other hand some people advocate confirmation to take place much later in life.

Some experiences from my own context may serve to present ongoing discussions in this area. If I only observe what happens in the congregation I belong to, I see different signs of confusion, or – to phrase it in a more friendly way – at least a certain need of re-orientation.

First, only very few people have given their public confession over the last years – as is the case also in many other congregations nowadays. This practice of recognizing and accepting one’s own infant baptism seems to be eroding quickly, albeit that the pace of this development is different in different congregations. It is certainly not understood as a welcome ‘event’, and the main argument probably is: ‘formation in faith is a life-long process; how could I take a one-moment decision for the rest of my life?’.

Secondly, the rite of baptism has changed in many respects, for instance to include an act of anointing. This might look like the orthodox tradition of combining the two sacraments of baptism and chrismation in the same ceremony, but of course this is not how it is understood.

Thirdly, a new rite of transition has found its place in our local church calendar. Somewhere in June every year, those children that will leave the primary school to enter secondary school after summer holidays are invited to come to church with their parents for a ‘step-over-worship’. After a kind of a ‘bar-mitswa’ ritual, the children stand in a circle around the baptismal font; the parents stand behind them, laying a hand on their shoulder; then the pastor anoints each of them, and the parents take their hands from their children’s shoulders and make a step backwards.

Fourthly, for about a decade now the commemoration of baptism and the re-affirmation of baptismal vows has been a highly appreciated aspect of the liturgy of

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<sup>13</sup> OB, para 40.

the Easter Vigil in this congregation. People will come to the baptismal font, touch the water, and then lighten a small candle with the light of the new Easter candle.

Now, let me be clear about this. Generally speaking, I welcome these changes – apart from the erosion of public confession. And I welcome the way *One Baptism* broadens perspectives by seeing baptism as an integral part of a process of lifelong growth into Christ. In fact I see many connections between this F&O view and these new developments. But at the same time, questions arise in terms of the possible need of new rules, in our worship books and maybe even in our church order. This is my next section.

### Practical suggestions in terms of church policy

In my view we – and here I can of course only speak for the Dutch context – should consider several changes in our practices as to baptism.

1. We might give infant baptism and adult baptism an equal place in our practice and policy. In our Constitution – the basic part of the Church Order – we have formulated it seemingly on an equal footing: “Baptism is administered to those *for whom or by whom* baptism is desired after profession of faith has been made by and with the congregation”.<sup>14</sup> The final words rightly point to fact that baptism is always embedded in faith. Of course ‘for whom’ (mentioned first) refers to infant baptism, and ‘by whom’ to adult baptism. But in the by-laws it becomes clear that there is a certain misbalance. The first article of the by-law on baptism clearly states: ‘In worship and pastoral care the congregation is encouraged to celebrate baptism, *especially baptism of the children of the congregation*’.<sup>15</sup> I think that we should fully respect the responsibility of parents to make their own choices here, of course counseling them in that process towards the best option in their specific situation.
2. Those parents who don’t want to have their children baptized but who do favor the alternative of having their children blessed and prayed for in a worship service, should be accommodated more generously than we do now.<sup>16</sup> In quite a few congregations we do know this practice, and our worship book offers some liturgical forms to do so, but the Church Order only once speaks – in a very general way – of ‘worship services of blessing’.<sup>17</sup>
3. We urgently need to reconsider the place of public confession of faith in our church. This is not a matter of liturgical forms and church order regulations, but most of all it requires a pastoral process. *One Baptism* rightly stresses that formation in faith is a life-long process and does not come to an end by an act of profession. How can we develop liturgical forms for younger – and why not

<sup>14</sup> Kerkerde van de Protestantse Kerk in Nederland, art. VIII–2.

<sup>15</sup> Kerkerde van de Protestantse Kerk in Nederland, ord. 6–1–1

<sup>16</sup> Cf. BEM/B, para II: “Some of these churches encourage infants or children to be presented and blessed in a service which usually involves thanksgiving for the gift of the child and also the commitment of the mother and father to Christian parenthood”; cf. EEI, para 48.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Kerkerde van de Protestantse Kerk in Nederland, ord. 5–1–2.



also older – people in the church to commit *or recommit* themselves to the community and its faith tradition? Rites of transition could be further developed for several situations, like the ones I mentioned. Our church order already adopts the option of combining the public confession of faith with the baptism of one's children or with the acceptance of the office of elders or deacons. I could also imagine something like a practical year of orientation in all aspects of local church life for young adults, to be completed with a formal moment of committing themselves to this congregation.

4. Finally, we have to deal with the wish of church members who long for a rite to experience anew their being baptized as a child. Since Tjitte Wever is introducing this subject in a separate contribution in this volume, I don't go deeper into it now. Let me only give a quote from the JWG Report: "reaffirmation and remembrance of one's baptism, in acts that may include elements or 'echoes' from the baptismal rite itself, is a proper aspect of Christian worship and spirituality (as when in a baptismal liturgy those present are asked to remember and explicitly affirm their own baptismal confession)".<sup>18</sup>

### Towards more mutual recognition of baptism?

Let me conclude with some remarks as to the ecumenical aspects of baptism, and more specifically the issue of mutual recognition of baptism.

*One Baptism* takes the issue up twice, both in its introductory section and in its concluding section.

The ecumenical picture regarding mutual recognition, as reflected in paragraph 9, is very complicated:

- for some churches mutual recognition of baptism is part of a full sharing in faith and life among the churches involved;
- for others there is mutual recognition of baptism, but no sharing at the eucharistic table; for instance, between roman catholics and protestants in the Netherlands;
- sometimes the mutual recognition of baptism is lacking, and churches require the (re-) baptism of all persons seeking membership, even if they have already been baptized in another church;
- finally, some churches leave it fully to the local congregations to decide on the recognition of baptism.

This survey leaves aside forms of one-sided recognition, like the recognition by the Protestant Church in the Netherlands of baptism in a Baptist congregation.

What exactly do we mean with 'mutual recognition of baptism'? *One Baptism*<sup>19</sup> distinguishes at least three dimensions:

- recognizing one another *individually* as Christians;

<sup>18</sup> EEI, para 101.

<sup>19</sup> cf. OB, para 10.

- churches recognizing the baptism of a person coming from another faith community *who seeks entrance* into this church;
- and churches recognizing one another *as churches*, that is, as authentic expressions of the One Church of Jesus Christ.

As the report says: “recognition indicates that one party *acknowledges* an already-existing quality, identity or status which it has discerned in another. It does not mean that one party *grants* to another a status which is within its power to give”.<sup>20</sup> In other words: “Mutual recognition of baptism is a process of the churches’ discerning apostolicity in one another’s lives or, put more fully: of *discerning*, in one another, the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church”<sup>21</sup> Here again three stages can be distinguished, like three concentric circles:<sup>22</sup>

- in the heart the discernment of the apostolicity of *the rite of baptism* itself: the elements of the liturgy of baptism are being recognized as signs of the common faith which Christians through the ages share (e.g. the Trinitarian formula, and the use of water);
- a wider circle implies discerning apostolicity in the larger pattern of Christian initiation of the other community;
- the widest circle entails discerning apostolicity in the ongoing life and witness of the ecclesial community that baptizes and forms the new Christian; here in many cases the problem of the mutual recognition of ministry forms a blockade.

Of course, here we are in the heart of present-day ecumenical problems and challenges. Recently the National Council of Churches in the Netherlands took the initiative to broaden and deepen the existing mutual recognition of baptism.

In fact, an explicit mutual recognition only exists between the RCC and the PCN and between the RCC and the Arminians. Here, three criteria are in place: the use of the Trinitarian formula, the use of running water, and the administration of baptism by someone who has been authorized by his/her own church to do so. So, basically the RCC has no problem to recognize a baptism administered by a female protestant pastor, and the PCN has no objections against the recognition of a baptism by a roman-catholic un-ordained church worker. At the same time, as you know, the RCC does not recognize our ordained ministry, but from the opposite perspective the PCN recognizes the ministry of a Roman Catholic priest. In the upcoming discussions under the auspices of the National Council of Churches we will certainly have to discuss the question how to deal theologically with this imbalance. This is also where the Report of the JWG might play a role.

In our relationship with the RCC it is clear that we mutually recognize the apostolicity of the rite of baptism itself, as well as apostolicity in the larger pattern of Christian initiation of the other community. But the RCC cannot recognize apostolicity in the ongoing life and witness of the PCN, in spite of the fact that – to quote the Decree on Ecumenism of the Second Vatican Council (1964) – “baptism (...) constitutes a sacramental bond of unity linking all who have been reborn by

<sup>20</sup> cf. OB, para 11, italics LJK.

<sup>21</sup> cf. OB, para 13, italics mine.

<sup>22</sup> cf. EEI, para 90–97.

means of it".<sup>23</sup> As the JWG report rightly says: "If there is one church of Jesus Christ and if baptism is entrance into it, then all those who are baptized are bound to one another in Christ and should be in full communion with one another. There should not be a division among ecclesial communities; baptism should impel Christians to work for the elimination of divisions".<sup>24</sup> And: "When there are obstacles to full communion among different communities, baptism still provides a degree of communion that is real, if imperfect".<sup>25</sup>

It is still a long way to go, but it might be worthwhile to take the mutual recognition of baptism as new starting point in ecumenical ecclesiological discussion. A 'baptismal ecclesiology' might serve us well in the present stage of ecumenical development.

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<sup>23</sup> *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 22; cf. EEI, para 5

<sup>24</sup> EEI, para 31

<sup>25</sup> EEI, para 61