

Baptism and Church Membership

Some theological theses from an ecumenical baptist perspective

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I. The Context

1. The challenge of peace and justice. In a world where there is too much mistrust, hatred, injustice and war, and where religions are often being used and misused and allow themselves to be used and misused to intensify conflicts, it is imperative that all people of good will participate in the struggle for peace, truth and justice.

2. Ecumenical responsibility. As Christians we confess “*one Lord, one faith, one baptism*” (Eph 4:5), and therefore we belong to the *one* body of Christ (Rom 12:5; 1 Cor 10:16f., 12:12f.). Such ecumenical thrust is inherent to our faith in Christ, and no church that is concerned about its very origin and foundation can escape ecumenical longing and responsibility.

3. The question of truth. Nevertheless, ecumenical responsibility can not be advanced at the expense of *truth*. Ecumenical encounters, conversations and dialogues are carried on in all parts of the world and among all major Christian denominations. They presuppose that “the Lord has yet more light and truth to break forth from his word”. We are all in the process of becoming what we are in Christ, none of us is infallible and therefore all of us are invited to repent and change in the direction of Christ.

With regard to the theology and practice of *baptism* this places special burdens and responsibilities upon Baptists, and it makes us all painfully aware of the broken and sinful state of the “body of Christ”. On *the one hand* Baptists want to respect the sacramental dignity and integrity of other churches. They want to recognise other churches as churches. They are committed to the New Testament understanding and practice of *one baptism*, and consequently, with the other churches, Baptists reject the practice of re-baptism. On *the other hand*, we can not overlook the fact that *believers’ baptism* is becoming universally recognised as the baptism that was practiced by the first Christians, and many voices, including theological voices from paedobaptist churches, suggest that it may be the Baptist responsibility within the wider church to uphold the theology and practice of believers’ baptism.

Given the practice of *indiscriminate* infant baptism in many of the established majority churches, it often happens that people who come to faith in Christ have no inner personal relationship to their own infant baptism. In such cases a conflict arises between the *sacramental integrity of the church* that baptised the person as an infant, the *freedom of conscience* of the person who has come to faith in Christ and wants to celebrate and confess that faith in baptism, and a commitment to a *responsible theology of baptism*.

Given the *ambiguity* of the situation - indiscriminate infant baptism, ecumenical responsibility, believers’ baptism - a *clear cut answer is not possible*. In finding an acceptable response we need to balance our understanding of Christian baptism with our responsibility to the wider church and a pastoral concern for people who seek membership and/or baptism in our churches.

4. Credibility. There is no doubt that in many countries the credibility of the church is at stake today. Many churches tend to either fulfil the expected societal function of sanctioning the social, cultural, economic and political status quo; or they tend to withdraw from societal responsibility into the safe harbour of a comfortable religious existence. Having recognised these dangers, churches today search for a new understanding of “church” in which the church more closely reflects its foundation, the story of Jesus. Traditional baptist emphases on the *gathered* and the *intentional* community, and on the importance of *preaching* have received ecumenical interest and relevance. These emphases need to be brought into a creative correlation with other insights and experiences from the *charismatic tradition*, the *sacramental practices* and the emphases on *ministerial offices*.

II. By what authority?

To discuss an issue such as baptism and to reach a conclusion about its theology and practice, the *foundation* on which such a conclusion is based needs to be made explicit. Is there a norm by which present theology and practice can be *measured*? Is there a source from which *renewal* can spring?

1. *Sola Scriptura* ("Scripture alone") - *solus Christus* ("Christ alone"). There is widespread theological consensus that the authority for Christian faith and practice is *Jesus Christ as he is confessed in the Scriptures*.

2. Creeds and confessions. Controversial is, what authority *denominational creeds and confession* have in the understanding and interpretation of Scripture. Here Baptists emphasise the *sola* in *sola scriptura*. While Anglicans have *The Articles of Religion* (1562) and Lutherans have their *Augsburg Confession* (1530) which guide them in their reading and interpretation of the Scriptures, Baptists have no universally valid confessions and creeds. When therefore the New Testament clearly indicates *believers' baptism* with the chronological order of *faith* being *followed by baptism*, then these emphases are accepted as determinative unless there are theological reasons that would speak against such a procedure. For Anglicans and Lutherans, to use these two large churches as illustrations, the matter is much more difficult. Both churches affirm the authority of the Scriptures, but at the same time they insist that their creeds and confession with their insistence on the practice of infant baptism are valid interpretations of the Scriptures.

3. Tradition. This does not mean that Baptists do not admit and appreciate the theological importance of *traditions* that go beyond the biblical canon. Revelation can not be frozen into the period when the New Testament was written. But by closing the biblical canon in the fourth century, the church recognised the need for *evaluating* and *measuring* tradition. Baptists (together with other Protestant denominations) therefore recognise the *critical* dimension of the biblical canon by distinguishing between *legitimate* and *illegitimate* traditions. The criterion for such a distinction is the christological content of the Scriptures.

III. Baptism in the earliest (New Testament) churches

1. Believers' baptism. The *New Testament* sources indicate that in early Christianity *all* people who experienced *faith* in Jesus Christ were baptised "*into Christ*" and became a *members of the church* - the universal "body of Christ", concretely manifest in a local house church. Believers were baptised *in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit* (explicit in Matthew 28:19). This baptism into the *trinitarian* history of God is also implied in the baptisms "in the name of Jesus" (Acts 2:38, 22:16).

2. The missionary situation. Believers' baptism originally took place in a *missionary situation*. People were invited to faith in Christ and on their positive and voluntary response they were baptised and became members of a local house church. It is being argued by paedobaptist churches that in countries where Christian churches have been established, that such a missionary situation is no longer given. Such arguments have never been wholly convincing since no country has ever been totally Christian, and as secularity and pluralism increases, such arguments become even less convincing.

1 Corinthians 7:14 suggests that children participate in their parents' faith and baptism: "... the unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through her husband. *Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.*" This makes sense in a society that has not been permeated by modern "Western" individualism. The implication is, of course, that one day the children would be mature enough to hear and respond to the Gospel for themselves.

Although the established churches in traditionally Christian countries are still strong, and many, if not most, children are being baptised as infants, it can hardly be overlooked that modern "Western" societies are rapidly becoming more and more pluralistic and secular. The *corpus christianum*, that great marriage between Christianity and culture that has lasted from Constantine in the 4th century

up to the Reformation and beyond, is a thing of the past. This is being acknowledged by most churches and therefore, at least in theory, paedo-baptist churches increasingly offer believers' baptism as an option, or even a preferred option.

3. Different theological emphases. The unified New Testament witness to the *one* baptism, and this being *believers'* baptism, and the universal *practice* of baptism does not exclude that there were *different theological emphases and interpretations for the meaning and importance of baptism*.

3.1. It is interesting, for instance, that we do not know whether Jesus baptised his followers or not. The only texts that speak to this question are contradictory (John 3:22, 4:1f.).

3.2. The apostle Paul, on the one hand does not question the importance of baptism and indeed builds his moral exhortations on the indicative of faith and baptism (in Romans 6 for instance), yet on the other hand he baptised only very few people (1 Cor 1:10-18) and he states explicitly: "...Christ did not send me to baptise but to proclaim the gospel ..." (1 Cor 1:17).

3.3. In Romans 6:1-11 the apostle Paul makes a distinction between having been buried with Christ in baptism, the subsequent Christian life, and then the future resurrection, while in the post-Pauline tradition - in Colossians 2:12 - this distinction is erased.

Romans 6:4 Therefore we *have been buried with him by baptism into death*, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so *we too might walk in newness of life*. 6:5 For if we *have been* united with him in a death like his, we *will* certainly *be* united with him in a resurrection like his. 6:6 We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. 6:7 For whoever has died is freed from sin. 6:8 But if we *have* died with Christ, we believe that we *will* also live with him.

Colossians 2:12 when you *were buried* with him in baptism, you *were also raised* with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

3.4. While most texts in the New Testament suggest the sequence Word - Faith - Baptism, there are also texts that emphasise that baptism saves and that in baptism the impartation of the Holy Spirit takes place (1 Peter 3:21; Titus 3:4-7).

4. Jesus' baptism. Although Jesus probably did not baptise, Jesus himself was baptised by John the Baptists. This baptism of Jesus by John was not a Christian baptism. It did not include the reference to Jesus' death and resurrection which is essential for Christian baptism. Nevertheless, Jesus baptism became formative in the Christian understanding of baptism and it was told and passed on with having Christian baptism in mind.

5. The household baptisms. It is unlikely that in New Testament days *children* were baptised. Household baptisms (Acts 16:33; 1 Cor 1:16) *could* have included children, but there is an increasing scholarly consensus that that was probably *not* the case. If children were baptised, they were children of believers. There was no indiscriminate baptism in the early church.

6. Baptist emphases. Baptists accept the New Testament witness to baptism as authoritative (*sola scriptura*), and they affirm that this has implications for other theological convictions:

6.1. The *qualitative difference between God and humanity* is affirmed. God *comes* to the believer and *grants* faith, while the *believer* gratefully *receives* the gift of faith and *celebrates* it in baptism.

6.2. Reality is understood as *relational* and therefore human persons must be addressed as *responsive* and *responsible* people.

6.3. The Reformation *sola fide* (by "faith alone") is affirmed in that faith is not relativised or by-passed or dissolved into grace.

6.4. The Reformation *sola gratia* (through "grace alone") is affirmed in that God is understood on God's terms (revelation) - "God *is* love". Love cannot coerce. It seeks, begs, persuades and longs

for human voluntary agreement, which in the believers' confession is itself the work of the Spirit of God.

6.5. The *sola gratia* is fully recognised in believers' baptism. In baptism the believer and the community of faith *celebrate* that God in his mercy has shared his life with the believer. At the same time believers *confess* that Jesus Christ has in the event of faith become their ultimate concern. Baptism is not human work. It is grateful response, confession and obedience to what God has done.

IV. Baptism, salvation and church.

1. Is baptism necessary for salvation and church membership? All major churches consider baptism to belong to the *esse* (the *necessary* being), not only the *bene esse* (the *desirable* being) or the *plene esse* (the *complete* being), of salvation and of the church. Baptism in the trinitarian name of God is considered to be necessary for salvation and for church membership. The sacramental dignity and integrity of a church or a denomination is therefore at stake if and when the validity of their baptism is questioned or denied.

2. The linking of baptism with "original sin". The doctrine of Infant Baptism has traditionally been closely linked to the doctrine of *inherited guilt* and *original sin*. Some major churches therefore practice *emergency baptism* if an infant is in danger of dying. This implies and it is admitted that there is a *difference* "in the sight of God" between a baptised infant and an unbaptised infant.

3. The importance of baptism for Baptists. Baptists agree that baptism is *demande*d by the *Scriptures* and that therefore it is *important*. At the same time they are divided on whether baptism is *necessary* for salvation and for being a Christian. The following reasons tend to suggest for most Baptists that baptism is *not* necessary for salvation and for belonging to the "body of Christ", but that it is necessary for belonging to a Baptist church.

3.1. There is a widespread conviction that the human being is *free* (however limited such freedom may be) and therefore can be *responsible*. For Baptists, baptism falls more into the realm of *human response* and it is therefore not necessary for salvation.

3.2. Such *human response* is to be *distinguished* but not separated from the event of *faith* as hearing and receiving the gospel.

3.3. Baptists would be hesitant to build a theology of baptism, and thereby a whole ecclesiology, on the doctrine of *original sin*.

3.4. The fate of children "before God" is covered by God's unconditional grace until such time that they can hear the gospel and determine their ultimate concern for themselves.

3.5. It is of course important to acknowledge and respect the sacramental dignity and integrity of a church. At the same time we must not overlook the contemporary ecumenical consensus that emphasises the ethical implications of baptism and that is critical of indiscriminate infant baptism. Is it therefore not legitimate to ask whether the *integrity of baptism* with its ethical implication, does not weigh as heavily as the *sacramental integrity of a church*?

V. Baptism, Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

1. Baptism "into Christ". Baptism as a religious rite was known and practiced in the ancient world (Judaism, Qumran, Hellenistic mystery cults, John the Baptist). *Christian* baptism has its meaning and identity not in the historical rite as such, but in what it brings to expression: the story of Jesus. *Christian* baptism is a baptism "into Christ".

2. In the power of the Spirit. Christian baptism effectively *inter-relates the story of Jesus with the life of the believer*. This is the work of the *Holy Spirit*. Baptism is therefore not merely an act of obedience, it is not merely following Jesus' example or command, it is certainly not a sacrament which is effective in and of itself, but it is a *spiritual event in which God's grace calls for a human response and human obedience*. The togetherness and mutual complementarity of divine *grace*

and human *response* and human voluntary *obedience* make up the content of baptism. Baptism presupposes *faith* and therefore it cannot be a sacrament which is effective in and of itself; baptism includes *grace* and therefore it cannot be a *mere* symbol or sign or ordinance.

3. By immersion. A symbol or sign must portray as closely as possible the matter that it represents.

The *christological* dimension of baptism is symbolised in the fact that believers are “buried” with Christ into his death, and then “raised” with Christ to newness of life (Romans 6). This analogy of Christ’s death and resurrection to that of the believer is best symbolised by the mode of *immersion*. At the same time it must be emphasised that baptism does not and can not add anything to the event of salvation which is given with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

4. In water. Water has the symbolic quality of *life* and *purification*. In the fourth Gospel, Jesus says to Nicodemus: “no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of *water and Spirit*” (3:5). In the waters of baptism, believers place themselves under the liberating Lordship of Christ and at the same time the *Spirit* effectively confirms the unconditional “Yes” which God has spoken in Christ.

5. The trinitarian formula. Through faith and baptism believers become part of God’s wider trinitarian history with his creation. Believers are therefore baptised “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). This is the only way we can verbally and sacramentally demonstrate that *God* has revealed himself in *Jesus* and that our experience of Jesus in the power of the *Spirit* is indeed an experience of *God*.

VI. Baptism and faith.

There is theological consensus that *baptism requires faith* to become what it is. While in the New Testament faith precedes baptism, churches which practise infant baptism claim that either the child has faith, or that the order of faith and baptism is arbitrary.

Baptists follow the New Testament pattern: faith is created by the Spirit through the Word, and this faith is then confessed and celebrated in baptism.

VII. Baptism and the church.

1. Baptism and church membership. Although faith comes to each individual, it does not individualise believers. It creates a community of faith, the church, of which people become members through faith and baptism. Since the universal “body of Christ” is manifest in the local church, baptism should normally be linked to church membership.

2. Baptism and discipleship. The early Christian witness and the experience of believers in non-Christian cultures today may help us to become aware of the *revolutionary nature of baptism*. Believers are baptised “into Christ”. Christ becomes their ultimate concern. It often implies a change of loyalties. Baptism can therefore call forth *suffering, rejection and persecution*.

3. New alliances. Through faith and baptism, however, the believer finds a new family, the family of God, in which the barriers of racism, sexism and other ideologies that bring enmity and separation into the human family are relativised (Gal 3:23-28; compare Mark 3:31-35).

4. Baptism and the “priesthood of all believers”. Baptism gives expression to the “priesthood of all believers” and therefore continually questions hierarchical and institutional structures in the churches. This alone would be sufficient theological reason for the ordination of women.

VIII. The meaning of Baptism

1. Diversity of meanings. The diversity of meanings that the early Christians applied to baptism is simply overwhelming. All facets of the riches of *salvation* that become real in the event of *faith* are also ascribed to *baptism*. Whatever is said about *grace* or about the *fruits of the Spirit* is also said

about baptism. It is clear that Christian baptism is an integral part of the event of faith in which the story of Jesus becomes inter-related with the story of the believer.

A few symbols that are related to baptism reveal the importance and the rich content of baptism:

- participating in the life, death and resurrection of Christ (Gal 3:26f.; Rom 6:3-11; Col 2:11f.).
- forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38, 22:16; 1 Cor 6:11; Col 2:12f.; Heb 10:22f.).
- justification (Gal 3:26f.; 1 Cor 6:11; Rom 6:7; Tit 3:5.7).
- new life (Eph 2:5f.).
- sanctification (1 Cor 6:11; Eph 5:25f.).
- the gift of the Spirit (Acts 2:38, 19:1-6; 1 Cor 6:11, 12:13; Gal 3:26-4:6).
- conversion (Tit 3:5; John 3:5).
- liberation from bondage (1 Cor 10:1f.).
- deliverance from evil powers (Col 1:13).
- inheriting the kingdom of God (John 3:5).
- creating and shaping a new humanity (Gal 3:27f.; 1 Cor 12:13).
- incorporation in the "body of Christ" (1 Cor 12:13; Gal 3:27f.; Acts 2:41).
- assurance of future salvation (Eph 1:13f., 4:30).

2. No sacramental security. In all this we must not forget that the meaning and value of baptism remains dependent on the *living presence of Christ* and *the faith and obedience of the believer*. There is no sacramental security: 1 Corinthians 10:1-22.

IX. The ethical implications of baptism

1. The story of Jesus as the foundation and content of baptism. Through faith and baptism the life of the believer is inter-locked with the story of Jesus and with the gift of the Holy Spirit. The story of Jesus includes Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Jesus' life entailed a specific vision of God and of God's ways with his world. This vision was Jesus' ultimate concern and for this vision Jesus was willing to be opposed, arrested, tried and executed. However, God raised Jesus from the dead and thereby constituted a new reality into which the believer is baptised. Those who are baptised "into Christ" become partakers of a "new" reality which is founded and shaped by the resurrection of the crucified Christ.

2. Faith as discipleship. This "new" reality is a realm in which the victory of Christ over the forces of estrangement is lived and celebrated. It calls for a life-style in which the loyalty to Christ and the power of the Spirit is reflected. Baptism as the "dying" with Christ and the "being raised" with Christ to newness of life (Rom 6) can only be lived in obedient discipleship. The baptised believer manifests the fruits of the Spirit. Baptism "has ethical implications which not only call for personal sanctification, but also motivate Christians to strive for the realisation of the will of God in all realms of life (Rom 6:9ff.; Gal 3:27-28; 1 Peter 2:21-4:6)." This new life-style includes dimensions such as:

- distinguishing between the *weakness of power* (Pilate, Constantine, Imperialism, Racism, Apartheid) and the *power of weakness* (Jesus, the persecuted church, Mahatma Ghandi, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Aung San Suu Kyi);
- affirming the *partiality of God* for the widow, the orphan, the stranger, the oppressed, the refugee, the asylum seeker, the single mother, the tortured and the many others who have no voice, no friends and no power;
- believing that it is *worthwhile* to commit oneself to follow Jesus and therefore to pursue justice, peace and the integrity of creation even in the face of often insurmountable odds;
- that it is better to "*be*" than to "*have*" and therefore resist the *ideologisation of money and private property* which often make an ultimate claim upon our conscience and therefore result in intolerance, racism and injustice;
- trust in the power of *non-violence*.

X. Baptism and ecumenical responsibility

There is *one* body and *one* Spirit, just as you were called to the *one* hope of your calling, *one* Lord, *one* faith, *one* baptism, *one* God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:4-6).

Christian baptism receives its significance from being related to the *story of Jesus* which is part of the *trinitarian* history of God with his creation. The particularity and the uniqueness of Christ, and the particularity and uniqueness of faith implies that there can only be *one* baptism by the *one* Spirit (1 Cor 12:13) into the *one* body of Christ (1 Cor 10:16f., Rom 12:5). The ecumenical implications are evident.

Baptism can never be the property of any one denomination. We can not disregard that all Christians are members of the "body of Christ". All responsible *Christian* theology today must be *ecumenical* theology. Denominational and other divisions among Christian churches must be regarded as a tremendous stumbling block for the credibility and mission of the Christian churches. Every church must try to make its contribution to the healing of misunderstandings and of divisions. The commitment to *truth* in each denomination or movement must be matched by an equal commitment to manifest the *unity* of the "body of Christ".

With regard to baptism there seems to be an insurmountable impasse. On the *one hand* infant baptism is so central to the theology, identity and integrity of the paedo-baptist churches that apart from some theologians (chief among them are some of the most famous Protestant theologians in our century: Karl Barth, Jürgen Moltmann and Eberhard Jüngel) there seems to be no institutional willingness to question the theology and practice of infant baptism. Any theological challenge to the doctrine of infant baptism is immediately seen as questioning the sacramental integrity of the paedo-baptist churches. On the *other hand* those churches who practise believers' baptism have the testimony of *Scripture* and the encouragement of *major theologians*, including those from the paedo-baptist tradition, on their side.

Is there a way forward? Will the churches find resources in their faith to deal with this crisis, or will they wait, as they have done too often, to let the secular world set the agenda?

I can only see one way forward at present. That the churches retrieve in their theology and practice what they confess in their creeds and confessions, namely, that "*Jesus Christ*, as he is testified to us in the Holy Scripture, is the *one* Word of God, whom we are to hear, whom we are to trust and obey in life and in death."

Perhaps, a new concentration on *Christ* and on following *him* could relativise the importance and centrality of baptism and thus allow greater flexibility in its theology and practice. For *Baptists* this may mean a greater willingness to respect the meaning that baptism may have for Christians who have been baptised as infants and to honour and appreciate the sacramental integrity of paedo-baptist churches. For *paedo-baptist churches* it may have to imply a willingness to cease the practice of indiscriminate infant baptism, and to offer believers' baptism as a real alternative.

XI. Baptism and Church Membership

Amongst other things (see above sections VIII and IX) baptism is also the *entry into the "body of Christ"*: "... in the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body" (1 Cor 12:13). The "body of Christ", the "church of God", is historically manifest in the local church. "There should thus be no baptism without membership in a church which is a local manifestation of the universal Body of Christ."

Membership practice and its relation to baptism varies in Baptist churches. Three practices with a number of variations are predominant: *closed membership*, *open membership*, and *modified open membership*. I shall briefly describe these three approaches, point out their ecumenical implications, and add an evaluation which attempts to keep in mind both the historical identity of Baptists and the present-day ecumenical challenge.

1. Closed Membership. Most Baptist churches practice closed membership. Only persons who have been *baptised as believers by immersion* can be admitted into membership.

In closed membership churches we meet *two "communion" practices*. Most churches practice *open communion*. At the communion table a general invitation is issued stating that all those who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and live in charity toward their neighbours are invited to participate. Some Baptist churches practice *closed communion*. In this case, only baptised believers are invited to participate in the Lord's Supper.

The "closed membership" and "closed communion" practice is certainly the most logical one. Is participation in the Lord's Supper not "watered down" if the requirements for participation in it are less stringent than for church membership?

However we live in a broken world and in a broken church. No church has the right to question the Christian integrity of another church. If therefore members of another church are present at the worship service they should be invited to share in the Lord's Supper.

If a member of another denomination who has not been baptised as a believer wants to become a member of a "closed membership" Baptist church, he or she must submit to believers' baptism by immersion. Their previous infant baptism is not considered to be "baptism."

This position maintains a traditional baptist concern for a church of intentional and committed believers. Believers' baptism as a demonstration of such commitment and intentionality was one of the main causes for the rise of the Baptist movement. In the contemporary situation this insistence is encouraged by the fact that many so-called "ecumenical" churches are not growing churches, and they seem to show no passionate interest in mission and evangelism.

The problem with this approach is well stated by a Baptist pastor from North Carolina: "Whenever a Christian from a recognised church must join another church by baptism, he is forced to declare, however silently, that his former life in the other church was totally unauthentic." And a British Baptist comments:

But if we are to say that infant baptism is "no baptism" then we are saying that for at least a thousand years the sacrament was not administered, and still is not administered in the greater part of Christendom. If true baptism is one of the essential marks of the true Church, then we are saying that for over a thousand years the true Church did not exist, and that the majority of people who today think they belong to it are under a serious misapprehension. In short, if infant baptism is "no baptism," then the Church that practices it is "no church." Few Baptists will want to go so far, and fewer still will find it possible to support such doctrines in practice. It is better to acknowledge that infant baptism, though partial in its expression of the truth and though involving serious theological distortion, is nevertheless baptism, and cannot therefore be followed by believers' baptism being administered to the same person.

There is force to these arguments - *if* baptism is considered to be an essential mark of the church and necessary for salvation. Otherwise, it would not be uncharitable if Baptists practice what they consider to be right with regard to baptism, and at the same time invite all Christians to the Lord's Supper table. Thereby they indicate that they do not question the "church" status of other denominations and the "Christian" identity of their members; and at the same time they would remain true to their own conviction about baptism and church membership.

Nevertheless, serious pastoral problems remain unsolved. What happens when a practicing Methodist or Anglican or Roman Catholic marries a Baptist and wants to participate in the life of the Baptist Church? If believers' baptism is *required* then the person may yield to it, but at the same time carry the spiritual burden around for the rest of their life whether their life in their former denomination was somewhat less worthy. Often in later years resentment and problems arise if baptism was not freely chosen. And as Baptists we have to ask the question whether we protect the dignity of baptism if it is merely a requirement for church membership, without standing at the beginning of the Christian life or church membership or a commitment to serious discipleship.

2. Open Membership. A number of Baptist churches around the world practice "open membership": for instance in Great Britain, Sweden, the USA., South Australia, and parts of Canada. The

constitution of the Flinders Street Baptist Church in Adelaide, South Australia, may serve as an illustration:

BELIEVERS' BAPTISM - The Church shall advocate the teaching and practice of believers' baptism by immersion. Its membership, however, shall be open also to those who, after the matter of baptism has been discussed with by a Pastor or other responsible Church officer, in conscience do not see it as their duty to be so baptised.

Baptism is seen here not as an essential, but as a desirable, mark of the church. It is not a prerequisite for church membership. If baptism is requested, it will in most of these churches only be administered by immersion and to believers. However, a "double practice" wherein believers' baptism and infant baptism are alternative possibilities - as in the Church of North India and some "Union Churches in Great Britain" - is possible. There are Baptist churches which in their full communicant membership have people baptised by immersion, people baptised as believers by sprinkling or pouring, and believers not baptised at all.

These churches are aware of the broken nature of the "body of Christ". They try to maintain the sovereignty of Christ, but not bind it to a certain form of baptism or to baptism at all. The "open" communion table is thus properly recognised in the membership structure of the local church.

3. Modified Open Membership. There are an increasing number of Baptist churches whose commitment to the sovereignty of Christ, whose loyalty to the biblical message, whose acceptance of other denominations as "churches", and whose vision of the coming unity of the church have led them to a "modified open membership policy".

This position holds that baptism is an essential mark of the church, or at least, that it is very important, and that it is necessary to be a member of a *Baptist* church. It maintains that believers' baptism by immersion is the best, but not the only mode and form. Although these churches would practice believers' baptism by immersion, believers' baptism of other churches is accepted even if it was not carried out by immersion. Some even plead that under certain circumstances infant baptism - although an unclear and insufficient baptism - may be recognised. A "modified open membership" church in North Carolina, USA, summarises the dilemma:

Are we being asked to say to Methodists, Presbyterians, and other Christians: 1. You have not been baptised at all. What you consider baptism is invalid, null, and void; or 2. You have been baptised. We accept you as equal Christians; but to be a Baptist, you must be re-baptised?

The Swedish Baptist theologian Torsten Bergsten, the British Baptist theologian George Beasley-Murray, and a recent study of the Doctrine and Worship Committee of the Baptist Union of Great Britain encourage Baptist churches, in certain circumstances, to say a hesitant but necessary "yes" to infant baptism if it "is administered in the presence of believing parents and godparents, who promise solemnly to bring up the baptised child in Christian faith and remind it of its baptism." At the same time a clear "no" should be said to "indiscriminate infant baptism," which in many countries has led to the situation that nearly all of their citizens are "baptised" as infants. In such a case all evangelistic activity would be considered proselytising, and all believers' baptism would be criticised as "re-baptism." Such a situation not only empties the very meaning of *baptism*, but it also distorts the Christian understanding of *church* as a community of believers in Jesus Christ.

In these "modified open membership" Baptist churches, Christians from other denominations who practice some form of responsible baptism are generally accepted. This acceptance is based on a letter of transfer or on the personal testimony of the believer; thus it may not imply any evaluation of the form of baptism to which the candidate has been submitted or has submitted. The only practice these churches themselves counsel and engage in is believers' baptism by immersion. It must be said clearly, however, that members of churches who practice indiscriminate infant baptism remain objects of mission, and converts will be offered believers' baptism by immersion. "Modified open membership" Baptist churches would not agree therefore that every baptism is valid, and they would not feel that a believers' baptism of persons who have been baptised as infants is necessarily a "rebaptism."

On the local level this model proves especially helpful for interconfessional marriages as well as where members of the same family from different traditions would like to be members of the same local church without submitting to what they consider to be another baptism.

4. Application. The problems which we have addressed are extremely real and existential one's for many Baptist churches, as they are also for members of churches or other denominations who may want to join a Baptist church and therefore face the issue of another baptism. We have tried to show that the issues have a *biblical/theological*, an *ecumenical*, and a *pastoral* dimension:

- we want to be true to our understanding of the biblical witness to the Word of God (this applies, of course, not only to baptism, but also to mission, evangelism, and the nature of the church);
- we want to be respectful of other churches who are as sincere as we are in their faith and practice;
- we want to be sensitive to people who believe in Christ and in whose biography God has been an important reality.

We need to ask ourselves, for instance, whether the meaning of believers' baptism is maintained if Baptists baptise a committed Christian who was baptised as an infant, who personally accepts that baptism as real, who has displayed his or her faithfulness in and through active membership in another church, and who now, for family or theological or practical reasons, wants to join a Baptist church. A new baptism would mark neither the beginning of his or her Christian life, nor their commitment to discipleship, nor the entry into membership of a Christian church. Such persons should be instructed in Baptist thinking and practice concerning baptism. If they agree to that in principle but hesitate to apply it to themselves because they do not want to negate their infant baptism and the story of their relationship with God for which that baptism stands, such person should, on the testimony of their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord, be accepted gladly into full membership of a Baptist church. This does not give theological validation to infant baptism, nor does it compromise the Baptist tradition. It simply shows respect for a believer's personal story with God.

Most difficult in our relationship with other churches are those many cases where people, who are baptised as infants and possibly even confirmed as teenagers, but who feel no inner relationship to God or to their church, are converted to Christ in the context of a Baptist church, and who as a result of their newly found faith want to become members of a Baptist church. Discerning Baptists know how offensive it is to the other churches if such persons are baptised (in their understanding: re-baptised) in the Baptist church. Here Baptists can only plead for understanding. When such persons come to a Baptist church with the request for baptism and membership, we are faced with a conflict. On the one hand, we know the theology of the other churches with their great emphasis on infant baptism, and we understand that on their premises a new baptism is unimaginable. On the other hand we hear the New Testament emphasis on the baptism of believers. And in our understanding faith in Christ cannot be exercised by an infant, nor do we think that the vicarious faith of the church, parents, or god-parents meets the requirements for a Christian understanding of baptism. Faith, in our understanding, calls for some degree of voluntariness, accountability, and ethical responsibility. On that basis, Baptists do not accept infant baptism as the baptism of which the New Testament speaks. If, in addition, the new believer wants to be baptised to celebrate his or her newly found faith, to confess commitment to discipleship, and to mark the entry into the church of their choice, then Baptists feel that the personal freedom of decision of the believer weighs heavier than the theology of the church into which he or she was integrated through infant baptism, i.e., without faith and choice of his or her own. In such cases, therefore, the full meaning of believers' baptism by immersion can be maintained and should be granted.

There is no easy, clear, and unambiguous answer to the problems raised here! All interests cannot be protected, and all sides cannot be satisfied. Nevertheless, taking into account the traditional Baptist emphasis on believers' baptism, the voluntary and deeply symbolic nature of such baptism, showing at the same time ecumenical concern and courtesy, and recalling our surpassing interest in obedient faith to the sovereignty of Christ and the emphasis on the gathered community, I feel that the "open membership model" or the "modified open membership model" will best meet the

demands of our time. The strong emphasis on personal faith and the resulting celebration of believers' baptism by immersion will be maintained. But at the same time there will be room for persons to join a Baptist church who for reasons of conscience and theological conviction cannot personally submit to a Baptist understanding and practice of baptism or for whom a new baptism would neither mark the beginning of the Christian life, nor a first commitment to Christian discipleship, nor a first entry into a Christian church.

XII. The Child in the church

This raises the question whether Baptists lack in their appreciation for children and their place in the family of God. Do not churches who baptise infants and through that baptism integrate children into the church, show a greater appreciation for God's concern for children? This question is intensified by the fact that we live in a world where the bodies and souls of children are abused and broken in so many ways.

With all other churches Baptists are committed to do whatever we can to lighten the load and to ease the burdens that are placed upon the children of the world. Baptists confess God's love for children, they gratefully recognise that Jesus took children into his arms and blessed them, they appreciate that Jesus used children to teach adults important insights into the nature of the kingdom of God (Mark 10:13-16; Matt 18:3f., 19:13-15; Luke 18:15-17), they recognise that Christ must be sought and can be found as we commit ourselves to safeguard the dignity of children (Mark 9:36f.; Luke 9:47f.). For Baptists there is no question that children are surrounded and protected by the love of God and that they with their parents and friends are part of the family of God.

The question is whether Christian *baptism*, as it comes to us through the testimony of the Scriptures, is the right way to declare and celebrate that God loves the child and that the children of Christians belong to the church family. Here Baptists prefer to follow the testimony of Scripture which does *not* link baptism to infants. At the same time, Baptists use other symbols like *infant dedication* or *infant presentation* or a *thanksgiving service* to allow *parents to give thanks for the birth of a child and to dedicate themselves to bring their children up in the "ways of the Lord"*, to ask for *God's blessings upon the child*, and for inviting the *church congregation* to commit itself to provide a credible Christian community in which children hear the story of Jesus through teaching (Sunday School) and example, and thus create a space in which children can trust Jesus as Lord and saviour and then be baptised on their confession of faith.

Children who are born into a Christian family and thereby into a Christian church fellowship are of course not more loved by God than any other children, but they have the decided advantage of hearing the gospel and being given the space to respond to it.

For Christians there is a difference between the *natural* family and the *natural* society into which a child is born without their say, and the *church* in which a person becomes a *member* through *voluntary faith and baptism*, and in which the Christian gladly accepts the call to *responsible Christian discipleship*.

The dignity of the child is in no way questioned if church membership is reserved for those who have voluntarily and intentionally decided to follow Jesus. Indeed the nature of the church as a community of faith calls for such a distinction.

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